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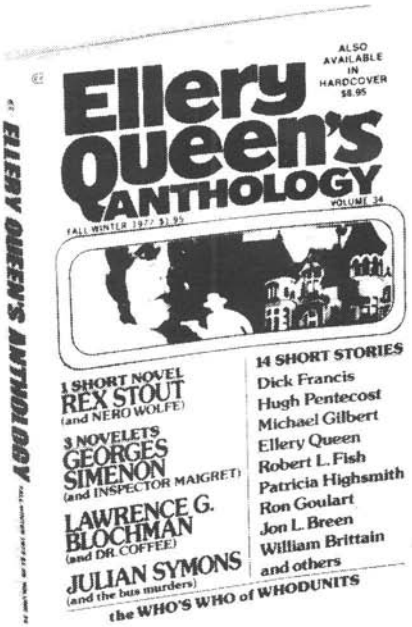

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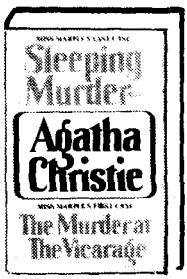

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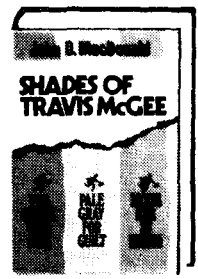

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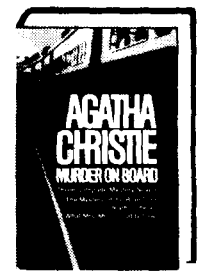

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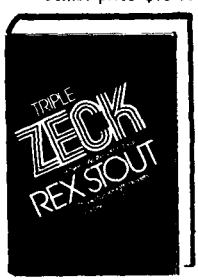

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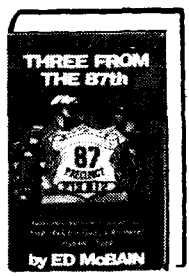

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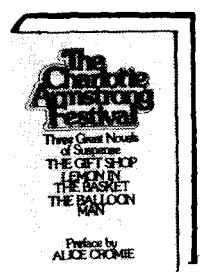

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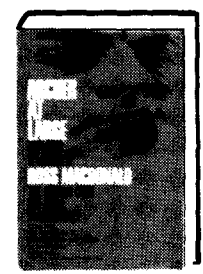

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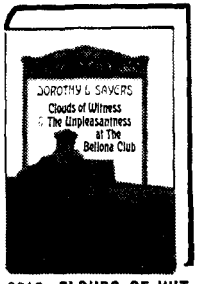

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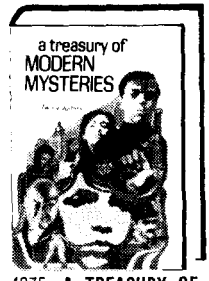

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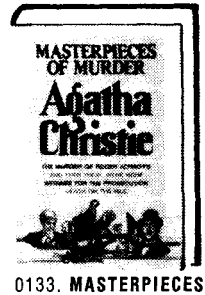

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THE SWEET CORN MURDER

by REX STOUT

When the doorbell rang that Tuesday evening in September and I stepped to the hall for a look and through the one-way glass saw Inspector Cramer on the stoop, bearing a fair-sized carton, I proceeded to the door, intending to open it a couple of inches and say through the crack, "Deliveries in the rear."

Inspector Cramer was uninvited and unexpected, we had no case and no client, and we owed him nothing, so why pretend he was welcome?

But by the time I reached the door I had changed my mind. Not because of him. He looked perfectly normal—big and burly, round red face with bushy gray eyebrows, broad heavy shoulders straining the sleeve seams of his coat. It was the carton. It was a used one, the right size, the cord around it was the kind McLeod used, and the NERO WOLFE on it in blue crayon was McLeod's style of printing.

Having switched the stoop light on, I could observe those details as I approached, so I swung the door open and asked politely, "Where did you get the corn?"

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I suppose I should explain a little. Usually Wolfe comes closest to being human after dinner, when we leave the dining room to cross the hall to the office, and he gets his bulk deposited in his favorite chair behind his desk, and Fritz brings coffee; and either Wolfe opens his current book or, if I have no date and am staying in, he starts a conversation.

The topic may be anything from women's shoes to the importance of the new moon in Babylonian astrology. But that evening he had taken his cup and crossed to the big globe over by the bookshelves and stood twirling the globe, scowling at it, probably picking a place he would rather be.

For the corn hadn't come. By an arrangement with a farmer named Duncan McLeod up in Putnam County, every Tuesday from July 20 to October 5, sixteen ears of just-picked corn were delivered. They were roasted in the husk, and we did our own shucking as we ate—four ears for me, eight for Wolfe, and four in the kitchen for Fritz. The corn had to arrive no earlier than 5:30 and no later than 6:30. That day it hadn't arrived at all, and Fritz had had to do some stuffed eggplant, so Wolfe was standing scowling at the globe when the doorbell rang.

And now here was Inspector Cramer with the carton. Could it possibly be it? It was. Handing me his hat to put on the shelf, he tramped down the hall to the office, and when I entered he had put the carton on Wolfe's desk and had his knife out to cut the cord, and Wolfe, cup in hand, was crossing to him.

Cramer opened the flaps, took out an ear of corn, and said, "If you were going to have this for dinner, I guess it's too late."

Wolfe moved to his elbow, turned the flap to see the inscription, his name, grunted, circled around the desk to his chair, and sat. "You have your effect," he said. "I am impressed. Where did you get it?"

"If you don't know, maybe Goodwin does." Cramer shot a glance at me, went to the red-leather chair facing the end of Wolfe's desk, and sat. "I've got some questions for you and for him, but of course you want grounds. You would. At a quarter past five, four hours ago, the dead body of a man was found in the alley back of Rusterman's restaurant. He had been hit in the back of the head with a piece of iron pipe which was there on the ground by the body. The station wagon he had come in was alongside the receiving platform of the restaurant, and in the station wagon were nine cartons containing ears of corn."

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Cramer pointed. "That's one of them, your name on it. You get one like it every Tuesday. Right?"

Wolfe nodded. "I do. In season. Has the body been identified?"

"Yes. Driver's license and other items in his pockets, including cash, eighty-some dollars. Kenneth Faber, twenty-eight years old. Also men at the restaurant identified him. He had been delivering the corn there the past five weeks, and then he had been coming on here with yours. Right?"

"I don't know."

"The hell you don't. If you're going to start that kind—"

I cut in. "Hold it. Stay in the buggy. As you know, Mr. Wolfe is up in the plant rooms from four to six every day except Sunday. The corn usually comes before six, and either Fritz or I receive it. So Mr. Wolfe doesn't know, but I do. Kenneth Faber has been bringing it the past five weeks. If you want—"

I stopped because Wolfe was moving. Cramer had dropped the ear of corn onto Wolfe's desk, and Wolfe had picked it up and felt it, gripping it in the middle, and now he was shucking it. From where I sat, at my desk, the rows of kernels looked too big, too yellow, and too crowded.

Wolfe frowned at it, muttered, "I thought so," put it down, stood up, reached for the carton, said, "You will help, Archie," took an ear, and started shucking it. As I got up Cramer said something but was ignored.

When we finished we had three piles, as assorted by Wolfe. Two ears were too young, six were too old, and eight were just right. He returned to h chair, looked at Cramer, and declared, "This is preposterous."

"So you're stalling," Cramer growled.

"No. Shall I expound it?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

"Since you have questioned men at the restaurant, you know that the corn comes from a man named Duncan McLeod, who grows it on a farm some sixty miles north of here. He has been supplying it for four years, and he knows precisely what I require. It must be nearly mature, but not quite, and it must be picked not more than three hours before it reaches me. Do you eat sweet corn?"

"Yes. You're stalling."

"No. Who cooks it?"

"My wife. I haven't got a Fritz."

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"Does she cook it in water?"

"Sure. Is yours cooked in beer?"

"No. Millions of American women, and some men, commit that outrage every summer day. They are turning a superb treat into mere provender. Shucked and boiled in water, sweet corn is edible and nutritious; roasted in the husk in the hottest possible oven for forty minutes, shucked at the table, and buttered and salted, nothing else, it is ambrosia. No chef's ingenuity and imagination have ever created a finer dish. American women should themselves be boiled in water. Ideally the corn—"

"How much longer are you going to stall?"

"I'm not stalling. Ideally the corn should go straight from the stalk to the oven, but of course that's impractical for city dwellers. If it's picked at the right stage of development it is still a treat for the palate after twenty-four hours, or even forty-eight; I have tried it. But look at this." Wolfe pointed to the assorted piles. "This is preposterous. Mr. McLeod knows better. The first year I had him send two dozen ears, and I returned those that were not acceptable. He knows what I require, and he knows how to choose it without opening the husk. He is supposed to be equally meticulous with the supply for the restaurant, but I doubt if he is; they take fifteen to twenty dozen. Are they serving what they got today?"

"Yes. They've admitted that they took it from the station wagon even before they reported the body." Cramer's chin was down and his eyes were narrowed under the eyebrow hedge. "You're the boss at that restaurant."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not the boss. My trusteeship, under the will of my friend Marko Vukcic when he died, will end next year. You know the arrangement; you investigated the murder; you may remember that I brought the murderer back from Yugoslavia."

"Yeah. Maybe I never thanked you." Cramer's eyes came to me. "You go there fairly often—not to Yugoslavia, to Rusterman's. How often?"

I raised one brow. That annoys him because he can't do it. "Oh, once a week, sometimes twice. I have privileges, and it's the best restaurant in New York."

"Sure. Were you there today?"

"No."

"Where were you at five fifteen this afternoon?"

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"In the Heron sedan which Mr. Wolfe owns and I drive. Five fifteen? Grand Concourse, headed for the East River Drive."

"Who was with you?"

"Saul Panzer."

He grunted. "You and Wolfe are the only two men alive Panzer would lie for. Where had you been?"

"Ball game. Yankee Stadium."

"What happened in the ninth inning?" He flipped a hand. "To hell with it. You'd know all right, you'd see to that. How well do you know Max Maslow?"

I raised the brow again. "Connect it, please."

"I'm investigating a murder."

"So I gathered. And apparently I'm a suspect. Connect it."

"One item in Kenneth Faber's pockets was a little notebook. One page had the names of four men written in pencil. Three of the names had checkmarks in front of them. The last one, no checkmark, was Archie Goodwin. The first one was Max Maslow. Will that do?"

"I'd rather see the notebook."

"It's at the laboratory." His voice went up a notch. "Look, Goodwin. You're a licensed private detective."

I nodded. "But that crack about who Saul Panzer would lie for. Okay, I'll file it. I don't know any Max Maslow and have never heard the name before. The other two names with checkmarks?"

"Peter Jay. J-A-Y."

"Don't know him and never heard of him."

"Carl Heydt." He spelled it.

"That's better. Couturier?"

"He makes clothes for women."

"Including a friend of mine, Miss Lily Rowan. I have gone with her a few times to his place to help her decide. His suits and dresses come high, but I suppose he'd turn out a little apron for three Cs."

"How well do you know him?"

"Not well at all. I call him Carl, but you know how that is. We have been fellow weekend guests at Miss Rowan's place in the country a couple of times. I have seen him only when I have been with Miss Rowan."

"Do you know why his name would be in Faber's notebook with a checkmark?"

"I don't know and I couldn't guess."

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"Do you want me to connect Susan McLeod before I ask you about her?"

I had supposed that would be coming as soon as I heard the name Carl Heydt, since the cops had had the notebook for four hours and had certainly lost no time making contacts. Saving me for the last, and Cramer himself coming, was of course a compliment, but more for Wolfe than for me.

"No, thanks," I told him. "I'll do the connecting. The first time Kenneth Faber came with the corn, six weeks ago today, the first time I ever saw him, he told me Sue McLeod had got her father to give him a job on the farm. He was very chatty. He said he was a free-lance cartoonist, and the cartoon business was in a slump, and he wanted some sun and air and his muscles needed exercise, and Sue often spent weekends at the farm and that would be nice. You can't beat that for a connection. Go ahead and ask me about Susan McLeod."

Cramer was eying me. "You're never slow, are you, Goodwin?"

I gave him a grin. "Slow as cold honey. But I try hard to keep up."

"Don't overdo. How long have you been intimate with her?"

"Well. There are several definitions for 'intimate.' Which one?"

"You know damn well which one."

My shoulders went up. "If you won't say, I'll have to guess." The shoulders went down. "If you mean the very worst, or the very best, depending on how you look at it, nothing doing. I have known her three years, having met her when she brought the corn one day. Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

"Then you know how she looks, and much obliged for the compliment. She has points. I think she means well, and she can't help it if she can't keep the come-on from showing because she was born with it. She didn't pick her eyes and voice, they came in the package. Her talk is something special. Not only do you never know what she will say next; she doesn't know herself. One evening I kissed her, a good healthy kiss, and when we broke she said, 'I saw a horse kiss a cow once.' But she's a lousy dancer, and after a show or prizefight or ball game I want an hour or two with a band and a partner.

"So I haven't seen much of her for a year. The last time I saw her was at a party somewhere a couple of weeks ago. I don't know who her escort was, but it wasn't me. As for my being intimate

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with her, meaning what you mean, what do you expect? I haven't, but even if I had I'm certainly not intimate enough with you to blab it. Anything else?"

"Plenty. You got her a job with that Carl Heydt. You found her a place to live, an apartment that happens to be only six blocks from here."

I cocked my head at him. "Where did you get that? From Carl Heydt?"

"No. From her."

"She didn't mention Miss Rowan?"

"No."

"Then I give her a mark. You were at her about a murder, and she didn't want to drag in Miss Rowan. One day, the second summer she was bringing the corn, two years ago, she said she wanted a job in New York and asked if I could get her one. I doubted if she could hold a job any friend of mine might have open or might make room for, so I consulted Miss Rowan, and she took it on. She got two girls she knew to share their apartment with Sue—it's only five blocks from here, not six—she paid for a course at the Midtown Studio—Sue has paid her back—and she got Carl Heydt to give Sue a tryout at modeling.

"I understand that Sue is now one of the ten most popular models in New York and her price is a hundred dollars an hour, but that's hearsay. I haven't seen her on a magazine cover. I didn't get her a job or a place to live. I know Miss Rowan better than Sue does; she won't mind my dragging her in. Anything else?"

"Plenty. When and how did you find out that Kenneth Faber had shoved you out and taken Sue over?"

"Nuts." I turned to Wolfe. "Your Honor, I object to the question on the ground that it is insulting, impertinent, and disgusticulous. It assumes not only that I am shovable but also that I can be shoved out of a place I have never been."

"Objection sustained." A corner of Wolfe's mouth was up a little. "You will rephrase the question, Mr. Cramer."

"The hell I will." Cramer's eyes kept at me. "You might as well open up, Goodwin. We have a signed statement from her. What passed between you and Faber when he was here a week ago today?"

"The corn. It passed from him to me."

"So you're a clown. I already know that. A real wit. What else?"

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"Well, let's see." I screwed my lips, concentrating. "The bell rang and I went and opened the door and said, quote, 'Greetings. How's things on the farm?' As he handed me the carton he said, 'Lousy, thank you, hot as hell and I've got blisters.' As I took it I said, 'What's a few blisters if you're the backbone of the country?' He said, 'Go soak your head,' and went, and I shut the door and took the carton to the kitchen."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Okay." He got up. "You don't wear a hat. You can have one minute to get a toothbrush."

"Now listen." I turned a palm up. "I can throw sliders in a pinch, and do, but this is no pinch. It's close to bedtime. If I don't check with something in Sue McLeod's statement, of course you want to work on me before I can get in touch with her, so go ahead, here I am."

"The minute's up. Come on."

I stayed put. "No. I now have a right to be sore, so I am. You'll have to make it good."

"You think I won't?" At least I had him glaring. "You're under arrest as a material witness. Move!"

I took my time getting up. "You have no warrant, but I don't want to be fussy." I turned to Wolfe. "If you want me around tomorrow, you might give Parker a ring."

"I shall." He swiveled. "Mr. Cramer. Knowing your considerable talents as I do, I am sometimes dumfounded by your fatuity. You were so bent on baiting Mr. Goodwin that you completely ignored the point I was at pains to make." He pointed at the piles on his desk. "Who picked that corn? Pfui!"

"That's *your* point," Cramer rasped. "Mine is who killed Kenneth Faber. Move, Goodwin."

At twenty minutes past eleven Wednesday morning, standing at the curb on Leonard Street with Nathaniel Parker, I said, "Of course in a way it's a compliment. Last time the bail was a measly five hundred. Now twenty grand. That's progress."

Parker nodded. "That's one way of looking at it. He argued for fifty thousand, but I got it down to twenty. You know what that means. They actually—here's one."

A taxi headed in to us and stopped. When we were in and I had told the driver Eighth Avenue and 35th Street, and we were roll-

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ing, Parker resumed, leaning to me and keeping his voice down. The legal mind. Hackies are even better listeners than they are talkers, and that one could be a spy sicked on us by the District Attorney.

"They actually," Parker said, "think you may have killed that man. This is serious, Archie. I told the judge that bail in the amount that was asked would be justified only if they had enough evidence to charge you with murder, and he agreed. As your counsel, I must advise you to be prepared for such a charge at any moment. I didn't like Mandel's attitude. By the way, Wolfe told me to send my bill to you, not him. He said this is your affair and he isn't concerned. I'll make it moderate."

I thanked him. I already knew that Assistant District Attorney Mandel, and maybe Cramer too, regarded me as a real candidate for the big one. Cramer had taken me to his place, Homicide South, and after spending half an hour on me had turned me over to Lieutenant Rowcliff and gone home. Rowcliff had stood me for nearly an hour—I had him stuttering in fourteen minutes, not a record—and had then sent me under convoy to the D.A.'s office, where Mandel had taken me on, obviously expecting to make a night of it.

Which he did, with the help of a pair of dicks from the D.A.'s Homicide Bureau. He had of course been phoned by both Cramer and Rowcliff, and it was evident from the start that he didn't merely think I was holding out on details that might be useful, to prevent either bother for myself or trouble for someone else; he had me tagged as a real prospect. Naturally I wanted to know why, so I played along. I hadn't with Cramer because he had got me sore in front of Wolfe, and I hadn't with Rowcliff because playing along is impossible with a double-breasted baboon, but with Mandel I could.

Of course he was asking the questions, him and the dicks, but the trick is to answer them in such a way that the next question, or maybe one later on, tells you something you want to know, or at least gives you a hint. That takes practise, but I had had plenty, and it makes it simpler when one guy pecks away at you for an hour or so and then backs off, and another guy starts in and goes all over it again.

For instance, the scene of the crime—the alley and receiving platform at the rear of Rusterman's. Since Wolfe was the trustee, there was nothing about that restaurant I wasn't familiar with.

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From the side street it was only about fifteen yards along the narrow alley to the platform, and the alley ended a few feet farther on at the wall of another building.

A car or small truck entering to deliver something had to back out. Knowing, as I had, that Kenneth Faber would come with the corn sometime after five o'clock, I could have walked in and hid under the platform behind a concrete post, with the weapon in my hand, and, when Faber drove in, got out, and came around to open the tailgate, he would never know what hit him.

If I could have done that, who couldn't? I would have had to know one other thing, that I couldn't be seen from the windows of the restaurant kitchen because the glass had been painted on the inside so boys and girls couldn't climb onto the platform to watch Leo boning a duck or Felix stirring goose blood into a Sauce Rouennaise.

In helping them get it on the record that I knew all that, I learned only that they had found no one who had seen the murderer in the alley or entering or leaving it, that Faber had probably been dead five to ten minutes when someone came from the kitchen to the platform and found the body, and that the weapon was a piece of two-inch galvanized iron pipe sixteen and five-eighths inches long, threaded male at one end and female at the other, old and battered. Easy to hide under a coat. Where it came from might be discovered by one man in ten hours, or by a thousand men in ten years.

Getting those details was nothing, since they would be in the morning papers, but regarding their slant on me I got some hints that the papers wouldn't have. Hints were the best I could get, no facts to check, so I'll just report how it looked when Parker came to spring me in the morning.

They hadn't let me see Sue's statement, but it must have been something in it, or something she had said, or something someone else, maybe Carl Heydt or Peter Jay or Max Maslow, had said, either to her or to the cops. Or possibly something Duncan McLeod, Sue's father, had said. That didn't seem likely, but I included him because I saw him.

When Parker and I entered the anteroom on our way out he was there on a chair in the row against the wall, dressed for town, with a necktie, his square deep-tanned face shiny with sweat. I crossed over and told him good morning, and he said it wasn't, it was a bad morning, a day lost and no one to leave to see

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to things. It was no place for a talk, with people there on the chairs, but I might at least have asked him who had picked the corn if someone hadn't come to take him inside.

So when I climbed out of the taxi at the corner and thanked Parker for the lift and told him I'd call him if and when, and walked the block and a half on 35th Street to the old brownstone, I was worse off than when I had left, since I hadn't learned anything really useful, and no matter how Parker defined "moderate," the cost of a twenty-grand bond is not peanuts. I couldn't expect to pass the buck to Wolfe, since he had never seen either Kenneth Faber or Sue McLeod, and as I mounted the seven steps to the stoop and put my key in the lock I decided not to try to.

The key wasn't enough. The door opened two inches and stopped. The chain bolt was on. I pushed the button, and Fritz came and slipped the bolt; and his face told me something was stirring before he spoke. If you're not onto the faces you see most of, how can you expect to tell anything from strange ones?

As I crossed the sill I said, "Good morning. What's up?"

He turned from closing the door and stared. "But Archie. You look terrible."

"I feel worse. Now what?"

"A woman to see you. Miss Susan McLeod. She used to bring—"

"Yeah. Where is she?"

"In the office."

"Where is he?"

"In the kitchen."

"Has he talked with her?"

"No."

"How long has she been here?"

"Half an hour."

"Excuse my manners. I've had a night."

I headed for the end of the hall, the swinging door to the kitchen, pushed it open, and entered. Wolfe was at the center table with a glass of beer in his hand. He grunted. "So. Have you slept?"

"No."

"Have you eaten?"

I got a glass from the cupboard, went to the refrigerator and got milk, filled the glass, and took a sip. "If you could see the bacon and eggs they had brought in for me and I paid two bucks for, let alone taste it, you'd never be the same. You'd be so afraid you

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might be hauled in as a material witness you'd lose your nerve. They think maybe I killed Faber. For your information, I didn't."

I sipped the milk. "This will hold me till lunch. I understand I have a caller. As you told Parker, this is my affair and you are not concerned. May I take her to the front room? I'm not intimate enough with her to take her up to my room."

"Confound it," he growled. "How much of what you told Mr. Cramer was flummery?"

"None. All straight. But he's on me and so is the D.A. and I've got to find out why." I sipped milk.

He was eyeing me. "You will see Miss McLeod in the office."

"The front room will do. It may be an hour. Two hours."

"You may need the telephone. The office."

If I had been myself I would have given that offer a little attention, but I was somewhat pooped. So I went, taking my half a glass of milk. The door to the office was closed and, entering, I closed it again.

She wasn't in the red-leather chair. Since she was there for me, not for Wolfe, Fritz had moved up one of the yellow chairs for her, but hearing the door open and seeing me she had sprung up, and by the time I had shut the door and turned, she was to me, gripping my arms, her head tilted back to get my eyes.

If it hadn't been for the milk I would have used my arms for one of their basic functions, since that's a sensible way to start a good frank talk with a girl. That being impractical, I tilted my head forward and kissed her. Not just a peck. She not only took it, she helped, and her grip on my arms tightened, and I had to keep the glass plumb by feel since I couldn't see it. It wouldn't have been polite for me to quit, so I left it to her.

She let go, backed up a step, and said, "You haven't shaved."

I crossed to my desk, sipped milk, put the glass down, and said, "I spent the night at the District Attorney's office, and I'm tired, dirty, and sour. I could shower and shave and change in half an hour."

"You're all right." She plumped onto the chair. "Look at me."

"I am looking at you." I sat. "You'd do fine for a before-and-after vitamin ad. The before. Did you get to bed?"

"I guess so, I don't know." Her mouth opened to pull air in. Not a yawn, just helping her nose. "It couldn't have been a jail because the windows didn't have bars. They kept me until after midnight asking questions, and one of them took me home. Oh,

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yes, I went to bed, but I didn't sleep, but I must have, because I woke up. Archie, I don't know what you're going to do to me."

"Neither do I." I drank milk, emptying the glass. "Why, have you done something to me?"

"I didn't mean to."

"Of course not."

"It came out. You remember you explained it for me one night."

I nodded. "I said you have a bypass in your wiring. With ordinary people like me, when words start on their way out they have to go through a checking station for an okay, except when we're too mad or scared or something. You may have a perfectly good checking station, but for some reason, maybe a loose connection, it often gets bypassed."

She was frowning. "But the trouble is, if I haven't got a checking station I'm just plain dumb. If I do have one, it certainly got bypassed when the words came out about my going to meet you there yesterday."

"Meet me where?"

"On Forty-eighth Street. There at the entrance to the alley where I used to turn to deliver the corn to Rusterman's. I said I was to meet you there at five o'clock and we were going to wait there until Ken came because we wanted to have a talk with him. But I was late, I didn't get there until a quarter past five, and you weren't there, so I left."

I kept my shirt on. "You said that to whom?"

"To several people. I said it to a man who came to the apartment, and in that building he took me to downtown I said it to another man, and then to two more, and it was in a statement they had me sign."

"When did we make the date to meet there? Of course they asked that."

"They asked everything. I said I phoned you yesterday morning and we made it then."

"It's just possible that you *are* dumb. Didn't you realize they would come to me?"

"Why, of course. And you would deny it. But I thought they would think you just didn't want to be involved, and I said you weren't there, and you could probably prove you were somewhere else, so that wouldn't matter, and I had to give them some reason why I went there and then came away without even going in the restaurant to ask if Ken had been there."

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She leaned forward. "Don't you see, Archie? I couldn't say I had gone there to see Ken, could I?"

"No. Okay, you're not dumb." I crossed my legs and leaned back. "You *had* gone there to see Ken?"

"Yes. There was something—about something."

"You got there at a quarter past five?"

"Yes."

"And came away without even going in the restaurant to ask if Ken had been there?"

"I didn't— Yes, I came away."

I shook my head. "Look, Sue. Maybe you didn't want to get me involved, but you have, and I want to know. If you went there to see Ken and got there at a quarter past five, you *did* see him. Didn't you?"

"I didn't see him alive." Her hands on her lap, very nice hands, were curled into fists. "I saw him dead. I went up the alley and he was there on the ground. I thought he was dead, but, if he wasn't, someone would soon come out and find him, and I was scared. I was scared because I had told him just two days ago that I would like to kill him. I didn't think it out, I didn't stop to think, I was just scared. I didn't realize until I was several blocks away how dumb *that* was."

"Why was it dumb?"

"Because Felix and the doorman had seen me. When I came I passed the front of the restaurant, and they were there on the sidewalk, and we spoke. So I couldn't say I hadn't been there and it was dumb to go away, but I was scared. When I got to the apartment I thought it over and decided what to say, about going there to meet you, and when a man came and started asking questions I told him about it before he asked." She opened a fist to gesture. "I did think about it, Archie. I did think it couldn't matter to you, not much."

That didn't gibe with the bypassing-the-checking-station theory, but there was no point in making an issue of it. "You thought wrong," I said, not complaining, just stating a fact. "Of course they asked you why we were going to meet there to have a talk with Ken, since he would be coming here. Why not here instead of there?"

"Because you didn't want to. You didn't want to talk with him here."

"I see. You really thought it over. Also they asked what we

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wanted to talk with him about. Had you thought about that?"

"Oh, I didn't have to. About what he had told you, that I thought I was pregnant and he was responsible."

That was a little too much. I goggled at her, and my eyes were in no shape for goggling. "He had told *me* that?" I demanded. "When?"

"You know when. Last week. Last Tuesday when he brought the corn. He told me about it Saturday—no, Sunday. At the farm."

I uncrossed my legs and straightened up. "I may have heard it wrong. I may be lower than I realized. Ken Faber told you on Sunday that he had told me on Tuesday that you thought you were pregnant and he was responsible? Was that it?"

"Yes. He told Carl too—you know, Carl Heydt. He didn't tell me he had told Carl, but Carl did. I think he told two other men too—Peter Jay and Max Maslow. I don't think you know them. That was when I told him I would like to kill him, when he told me he had told you."

"And that's what you told the cops we wanted to talk with him about?"

"Yes. I don't see why you say I thought wrong, thinking it wouldn't matter much to you, because you weren't there. Can't you prove you were somewhere else?"

I shut my eyes to look it over. The more I sorted it out, the messier it got. Mandel hadn't been fooling when he asked the judge to put a fifty-grand tag on me; the wonder was that he hadn't hit me with the big one.

I opened my itching eyes and had to blink to get her in focus. "For a frame," I said, "it's close to perfect, but I'm willing to doubt if you meant it. I doubt if you know the ropes well enough, and why pick on me? I am not a patsy. But whether you meant it or not, what are you here for? Why bother to come and tell me about it?"

"Because . . . I thought . . . don't you understand, Archie?"

"I understand plenty, but not why you're here."

"But don't you see, it's my word against yours. They told me last night that you denied that we had arranged to meet there. I wanted to ask you . . . I thought you might change that, you might tell them that you denied it just because you didn't want to be involved, that you had agreed to meet me there but you decided not to go, and they'll have to believe you because of course

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you were somewhere else. Then they won't have any reason not to believe me."

She put out a hand. "Archie . . . will you? Then it will be all right."

"Holy saints. You think so?"

"Of course it will. The way it is now, they think either I'm lying or you're lying, but if you tell them—"

"Shut up!"

She gawked at me; then all of a sudden she broke. Her head went down, and her hands up to cover her face. Her shoulders started to tremble and then she was shaking all over. If she had sobbed or groaned or something I would have merely waited it out, but there was no sound effect at all, and that was dangerous. She might crack.

I went to Wolfe's desk and got the vase of orchids, *Dendrobium nobile* that day, removed the flowers and put them on my desk pad, went to her, got fingers under her chin, forced her head up, and sloshed her good. The vase holds two quarts. Her hands came down and I sloshed her again, and she squealed and grabbed for my arm. I dodged, put the vase on my desk, went to the bathroom, which is over in the corner, and came back with a towel. She was on her feet, dabbing at her front.

"Here," I said, "use this."

She took it and wiped her face. "You didn't have to do that," she said.

"The hell I didn't." I got another chair and put it at a dry spot, went to my desk, and sat. "It might help if someone did it to me. Now listen. Whether you meant it or not, I am out on an extremely rickety limb. Ken did not tell me last Tuesday that you thought you were pregnant and he was responsible, he told me nothing whatever, but whether he lied to you or you're lying to the cops and me, they *think* he did.

"They also think or suspect that you and I have been what they call intimate. They also expect you to say under oath that I agreed to meet you at the entrance of that alley yesterday at five o'clock, and I can't prove I wasn't there. There's a man who will say he was with me somewhere else, but he's a friend of mine and he often works with me when Mr. Wolfe needs more help, and the cops don't have to believe him and neither would a jury. I don't know what else the cops have or haven't got, but any time now—"

"I didn't lie to you, Archie." She was on the dry chair, gripping

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the towel. A strand of wet hair dropped over her eye and she pushed it back. "Everything I told—"

"Skip it. Any time now, any minute, I may be hauled in on a charge of murder, and then where am I? Or suppose I somehow made it stick that I did not agree to meet you there, that you're lying to them, and I wasn't there. Then where will *you* be? The way it stands, the way you've staged it, today or tomorrow either you or I will be in the jug with no out. So either I—"

"But Archie, you—"

"Don't interrupt. Either I wriggle off by selling them on you—and by the way, I haven't asked you." I got up and went to her. "Stand up. Look at me." I extended my hands at waist level, open, palms up. "Put your hands on mine, palms down. No, don't press, relax, just let them rest there. Damn it, relax! Right. Look at me. Did you kill Ken?"

"No."

"Again. Did you kill him?"

"No. Archie!"

I turned and went back to my chair. She came a step forward, backed up, and sat. "That's my private lie detector," I told her. "Not patented. Either I wriggle off by selling them on you, and it would take some wriggling, which is not my style, or I do a job that *is* my style—I hope.

"As you know, I work for Nero Wolfe. First I see him and tell him I'm taking a leave of absence—I hope a short one. Then you and I go some place where we're sure we won't be interrupted, and you tell me things, a lot of things, and no fudging. Where I go from there depends on what you tell me. I'll tell *you* one thing now, if you—"

The door opened and Wolfe was there. He crossed to the corner of his desk, faced her, and spoke. "I'm Nero Wolfe. Will you please move to this chair?" He indicated the red-leather chair by a nod, circled around his desk, and sat. He looked at me. "A job that is your style?"

Well. As I remarked when he insisted that I see her in the office, if I hadn't been pooped I would have given that offer a little attention. If I had been myself I would have known, or at least suspected, what he intended. I suppose he and I came as close to trusting each other as any two men can, on matters of joint concern, but as he had told Parker, this was my affair, and I was discussing it with someone in his office, keeping him away from his

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favorite chair, and I had just told him that nothing of what I had told Cramer was flummery. So he had gone to the hole in the alcove.

I looked back at him. "I said I hope. What if I heard the panel open and steered clear?"

"Pfui. Clear of what?"

"Okay. Your trick. But I think she has a right to know."

"I agree." Sue had moved to the red-leather chair, and he swiveled. "Miss McLeod. I eavesdropped, without Mr. Goodwin's knowledge. I heard all that was said, and I saw. Do you wish to complain?"

She had fingered her hair back, but it was still a sight. "Why?" she asked.

"Why did I listen? To learn how much of a pickle Mr. Goodwin was in. And I learned. I have intruded because the situation is intolerable. You are either a cockatrice or a witling. Whether by design or stupidity, you have brought Mr. Goodwin to a desperate pass. That is—"

I broke in. "It's my affair. You said so."

He stayed at her. "That is his affair, but now it threatens me. I depend on him. I can't function properly, let alone comfortably, without him. He just told you he would take a leave of absence. That would be inconvenient for me but bearable, even if it were rather prolonged, but it's quite possible that I would lose him for good, and that would be a calamity. I won't have it. Thanks to you, he is in grave jeopardy." He turned. "Archie. This is now our joint affair. By your leave."

I raised both eyebrows. "Retroactive? Parker and my bail?"

He made a face. "Very well. Intimate or not, you have known Miss McLeod three years. Did she kill that man?"

"No and yes."

"That doesn't help."

"I know it doesn't. The 'no' because of a lot of assorted items, including the lie-detector test I just gave her, which of course you would hoot at if you hooted. The 'yes,' chiefly because she's here. Why did she come? She says, to ask me to change my story and back hers up, that we had a date to meet there. That's a good deal to expect, and I wonder.

"If she killed him, of course she's scared stiff and she might ask anybody anything, but if she didn't, why come and tell me she went in the alley and saw him dead and scooted? I wonder. On

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balance, one will get you two that she didn't. One item for 'no,' when a man gets a girl pregnant her normal procedure is to make him marry her, and quick. What she wants most and has got to have is a father for the baby, and not a dead father. She certainly isn't going to kill him unless—"

"That's silly," Sue blurted, "I'm not pregnant."

I stared. "You said Ken told you he told me."

She nodded. "Ken would tell anybody anything."

"But you thought you were?"

"Of course not. How could I? There's only one way a girl can get pregnant, and it couldn't have been that with me because it's never happened."

Like everybody else, I like to kid myself that I know why I think this or do that, but sometimes it just won't work, and that was once. I don't mean why I believed her about not being pregnant and how she knew she couldn't be; I do know that; it was the way she said it and the way she looked. I *had* known her three years. But since, if I believed her on that, I had to scrap the item I had just given Wolfe for 'no' on her killing Faber, why didn't I change the odds to even money?

I pass. I could cook up a case, for instance if she was straight on one thing, about not being pregnant and why not, she was probably straight on other things too, but who would buy it? It's even possible that every man alive, of whom I am one, has a feeling down below that an unmarried girl who knows she *can't* be pregnant is less apt to commit murder than one who can't be sure. I admit that a good private detective shouldn't have feelings down below, but have you any suggestions?

Since Wolfe pretends to think I could qualify on the witness stand as an expert on attractive young women, of course he turned to me and said, "Archie?" and I nodded yes. An expert shouldn't back and fill, and as I just said, I believed her on the pregnancy issue. Wolfe grunted, told me to take my notebook, gave her a hard eye for five seconds, and started in.

An hour and ten minutes later, when Fritz came to announce lunch, I had filled most of a new notebook and Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes shut and his lips tight. It was evident that he was going to have to work. She had answered all his questions with no apparent fumbling, and it still looked very much as if either I was going to ride the bumps or she was. Or possibly both.

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As she told it, she had met Ken Faber eight months ago at a party at the apartment of Peter Jay. Ken had been fast on the follow-up, and four months later, in May, she had told him she would marry him some day—say in two or three years, when she was ready to give up modeling—if he had shown that he could support a family.

From the notebook: "I was making over eight hundred dollars a week, ten times as much as he was, and of course if I got married I couldn't expect to keep that up. I don't think a married woman should model anyway because if you're married you ought to have babies, and there's no telling what that will do to you, and who looks after the babies?"

In June, at his request, she had got her father to give him a job on the farm, but she had soon regretted it. From the notebook: "Of course he knew I went to the farm weekends in the summer, and the very first weekend it was easy to see what his idea was. He thought it would be different on the farm than in town, it would be easy to get me to do what he wanted, as easy as falling off a log.

"The second week it was worse, and the third week it was still worse, and I was seeing what he was really like and I wished I hadn't said I would marry him. He accused me of letting other men do what I wouldn't let him do, and he tried to make me promise I wouldn't date any other man, even for dinner or a show.

"Then the last week in July he seemed to get some sense, and I thought maybe he had just gone through some kind of phase or something, but last week, Friday evening, he was worse than ever all of a sudden, and Sunday he told me he had told Archie Goodwin that I thought I was pregnant and he was responsible, and of course Archie would pass it on, and if I denied it no one would believe me, and the only thing to do was to get married right away.

"That was when I told him I'd like to kill him. Then the next day, Monday, Carl—Carl Heydt—told me that Ken had told him the same thing, and I suspected he had told two other men, on account of things they had said, and I decided to go there Tuesday and see him. I was going to tell him he had to tell Archie and Carl it was a lie, and anybody else he had told, and if I had to I'd get a lawyer."

If that was straight, and the part about Carl Heydt and Peter Jay and Max Maslow could be checked, that made it more like ten

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to one that she hadn't killed him. She couldn't have ad-libbed it; she would have had to go there intending to kill him, or at least bruise him, since she couldn't have just happened to have with her a piece of two-inch pipe sixteen inches long. Say twenty to one.

But if she hadn't who had? Better than twenty to one, not some thug. There had been eighty bucks in Ken's pockets, and why would a thug go up that alley with the piece of pipe, much less hide under the platform with it? No. It had to be someone out for Ken specifically who knew that spot, or at least knew about it, and knew he would come there, and when.

Of course it was possible the murderer was someone Sue had never heard of and the motive had no connection with her, but that would make it really tough, and there she was, and Wolfe got all she had—or at least everything she would turn loose of. She didn't know how many different men she had had dates with in the twenty months she had been modeling—maybe thirty. More in the first year than recently; she had thought it would help to get jobs if she knew a lot of men, and it had, but now she turned down as many jobs as she accepted.

When she said she didn't know why so many men wanted to date her Wolfe made a face, but I knew she really meant it. It was hard to believe that a girl with so much born come-on actually wasn't aware of it, but I knew her, and so did my friend Lily Rowan, who *is* an expert on women.

She didn't know how many of them had asked her to marry them; maybe ten; she hadn't kept count. Of course you don't like her; to like a girl who says things like that, you'd have to see her and hear her, and if you're a man you wouldn't stop to ask whether you liked her or not. I frankly admit that the fact that she couldn't dance had saved me a lot of wear and tear.

From the time she had met Ken Faber she had let up on dates, and in recent months she had let only three other men take her places. Those three had all asked her to marry them, and they had stuck to it in spite of Ken Faber. Carl Heydt, who had given her her first modeling job, was nearly twice her age, but that wouldn't matter if she wanted to marry him when the time came. Peter Jay, who was something important in a big advertising agency, was younger, and Max Maslow, who was a fashion photographer, was still younger.

She had told Carl Heydt that what Ken had told him wasn't

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true, but she wasn't sure that he had believed her. She couldn't remember exactly what Peter Jay and Max Maslow had said that made her think that Ken had told them too; she hadn't had the suspicion until Monday, when Carl had told her what Ken had told him. She had told no one that she was going to Rusterman's Tuesday to see Ken.

All three of them knew about the corn delivery to Rusterman's and Nero Wolfe; they knew she had made the deliveries for two summers and had kidded her about it; Peter Jay had tried to get her to pose in a cornfield, in an evening gown, for a client of his. They knew Ken was working at the farm and was making the deliveries.

From the notebook, Wolfe speaking: "You know those men quite well. You know their temperaments and bents. If one of them, enraged beyond endurance by Mr. Faber's conduct, went there and killed him, which one? Remember it was not a sudden fit of passion, it was planned. From your knowledge of them, which one?"

She was staring. "They didn't."

"Not 'they.' One of them. Which?"

She shook her head. "None of them."

Wolfe wiggled a finger at her. "That's twaddle, Miss McLeod. You may be shocked at the notion that someone close to you is a murderer; anyone would be; but you may not reject it as inconceivable. By your foolish subterfuge you have made it impossible to satisfy the police that neither you nor Mr. Goodwin killed that man except by one procedure: demonstrate that someone else killed him, and identify him. I must see those three men, and, since I never leave my house on business, they must come to me. Will you get them here? At nine o'clock this evening?"

"No," she said. "I won't."

He glared at her. If she had been merely a client, with nothing but a fee at stake, he would have told her to either do as she was told or clear out; but the stake was an errand boy it would be a calamity to lose—me—as he had admitted in my hearing. So he turned the glare off and turned a palm up.

"Miss McLeod. I concede that your refusal to think ill of a friend is commendable. I concede that Mr. Faber may have been killed by someone you have never heard of with a motive you can't even conjecture—and by the way, I haven't asked you: do you know of anyone who might have had a ponderable reason for killing him?"

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"No."

"But it's possible that Mr. Heydt does, or Mr. Jay or Mr. Maslow. Even accepting your conclusion that none of them killed him, I must see them. I must also see your father, but separately—I'll attend to that. My only possible path to the murderer is the motive, and one or more of those four men, who knew Mr. Faber, may start me on it. I ask you to have those three here this evening. Not you with them."

She was frowning. "But you can't . . . you said identify him. How can you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I can't, but I must try. Nine o'clock?"

She didn't want to, even after the concessions he had made, but she had to admit that we had to get some kind of information from somebody, and who else was there to start with? So she finally agreed, definitely, and Wolfe leaned back with his eyes shut and his lips tight, and Fritz came to announce lunch.

Sue got up to go, and when I returned after seeing her to the door and out, Wolfe had crossed to the dining room and was at the table. Instead of joining him, I stood and said, "Ordinarily I would think I was well worth it, but right now I'm no bargain at any price. Have we a program for the afternoon?"

"No. Except to telephone Mr. McLeod."

"I saw him at the D.A.'s office. Then I'm going up and rinse off. I think I smell. Tell Fritz to save me a bite in the kitchen."

I went to the hall and mounted the two flights to my room. During the forty minutes it took to do the job I kept telling my brain to lay off until it caught up, but it wouldn't. It insisted on trying to analyze the situation, with the emphasis on Sue McLeod. If I had her figured wrong, if she was it, it would almost certainly be a waste of time to try to get anything from three guys who were absolutely hooked, and if there was no program for the afternoon I had damn well better think one up. If it would be a calamity for Wolfe to lose me for good, what would it be for me?

By the time I stepped into the shower the brain had it doped that the main point was the piece of pipe. She had not gone into that alley toting that pipe; that was out. But I hadn't got that point settled conclusively by Cramer or Mandel, and I hadn't seen a morning paper. I would consult *The Times* when I went downstairs. But the brain wanted to know now, and when I left the shower I dried in a hurry, went to the phone on the bedtable, dialed the *Gazette*, got Lon Cohen, and asked him.

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Of course he knew I had spent the night downtown and he wanted a page or two of facts, but I told him I was naked and would catch cold, and how final was it that whoever had conked Faber had brought the pipe with him? Sewed up, Lon said. Positively. The pipe was at the laboratory, revealing—maybe—its past to the scientists, and three or four dicks with color photos of it were trying to pick up its trail. I thanked him and promised him something for a headline if and when. So that was settled.

As I went to a drawer for clean shorts the brain started in on Carl Heydt, but it had darned little to work on, and by the time I tied my tie it was buzzing around trying to find a place to land.

Downstairs Wolfe was still in the dining room, but I went on by to the kitchen, got at my breakfast table with *The Times*, and was served by Fritz with what do you think? Corn fritters. There had been eight perfectly good ears, and Fritz hates to throw good food away. With bacon and homemade blackberry jam they were ambrosia, and in *The Times* report on the Faber murder Wolfe's name was mentioned twice and mine four times, so it was a fine meal.

I had finished the eighth fritter and was deciding whether to take on another one and a third cup of coffee when the doorbell rang, and I got up and went to the hall for a look. Wolfe was back in the office, and I stuck my head in and said, "McLeod."

He let out a growl. True, he had told Sue he must see her father and was even going to phone to ask him to come in from the country, but he always resents an unexpected visitor, no matter who. Ignoring the growl, I went to the front and opened the door, and when McLeod said he wanted to see Mr. Wolfe, with his burr on the r, I invited him in, took his Sunday hat, a dark gray antique fedora in good condition, put it on the shelf, and took him to the office. Wolfe, who is no hand-shaker, told him good afternoon and motioned to the red-leather chair.

McLeod stood. "No need to sit," he said. "I've been told about the corn and I came to apologize. I'm to blame, and I'd like to explain how it happened. I didn't pick it; that young man did. Kenneth Faber."

Wolfe grunted. "Wasn't that heedless? I telephoned the restaurant this morning and was told that theirs was as bad as mine. You know what we require."

He nodded. "I ought to by now. You pay a good price, and I want to say it'll never happen again. I'd like to explain it. A man

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was coming Thursday with a bulldozer to work on a lot I'm clearing, but Monday night he told me he'd have to come Wednesday instead, and I had to dynamite a lot of stumps and rock before he came.

"I got at it by daylight yesterday and I thought I could finish in time to pick the corn, but I had some trouble and I had to leave the corn to that young man. I had showed him and I thought he knew. So I've got to apologize and I'll see it don't happen again. Of course I'm not expecting you to pay for it."

Wolfe grunted. "I'll pay for the eight ears we used. It was vexatious, Mr. McLeod."

"I know it was." He turned and aimed his gray-blue eyes, with their farmer's squint, at me. "Since I'm here I'm going to ask you. What did that young man tell you about my daughter?"

I met his eyes. It was a matter not only of murder, but also of my personal jam that might land me in the jug any minute, and all I really knew of him was that he was Sue's father and he knew how to pick corn.

"Not a lot," I said. "Where did you get the idea he told me anything about her?"

"From her. This morning. What he told her he told you. So I'm asking you, to get it straight."

"Mr. McLeod," Wolfe cut in. He nodded at the red-leather chair. "Please sit down."

"No need to sit. I just want to know what that young man said about my daughter."

"She has told you what he said he said. She has also told Mr. Goodwin and me. We have spoken with her at length. She came shortly after eleven o'clock this morning to see Mr. Goodwin and stayed two hours."

"My daughter Susan? Came here?"

"Yes."

McLeod moved. In no hurry he went to the red-leather chair, sat, focused on Wolfe, and demanded, "What did she come for?"

Wolfe shook his head. "You have it wrong side up. That tone is for us, not you. We may or may not oblige you later; that will depend. The young man you permitted to pick my corn has been murdered, and because of false statements made by your daughter to the police, Mr. Goodwin may be charged with murder. The danger is great and imminent. You say you spent yesterday dynamiting stumps and rocks. Until what hour?"

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McLeod's set jaw made his deep-tanned seamed face even squarer.

"My daughter doesn't make false statements," he said. "What were they?"

"They were about Mr. Goodwin. Anyone will lie when the alternative is intolerable. She may have been impelled by a desperate need to save herself, but Mr. Goodwin and I do not believe she killed that man. Archie?"

I nodded. "Right. Any odds you want to name."

"And we're going to learn who did kill him. Did you?"

"No. But I would have, if—" He let it hang.

"If what?"

"If I had known what he was saying about my daughter. I told them that, the police. I heard about it from them, and from my daughter, last night and this morning. He was a bad man, an evil man. You say you're going to learn who killed him, but I hope you don't. I told them that too. They asked me what you did, about yesterday, and I told them I was there in the lot working with the stumps until nearly dark and it made me late with the milking. I can tell you this, I don't resent you thinking I might have killed him, because I might."

"Who was helping you with the stumps?"

"Nobody, not in the afternoon. He was with me all morning after he did the chores, but then he had to pick the corn and then he had to go with it."

"You have no other help?"

"No."

"Other children? A wife?"

"My wife died ten years ago. We only had Susan. I told you, I don't resent this, not a bit. I said I would have killed him if I'd known. I didn't want her to come to New York, I knew something like this might happen—the kind of people she got to know and all the pictures of her. I'm an old-fashioned man and I'm a righteous man, only that word righteous may not mean for you what it means for me. You said you might oblige me later. What did my daughter come here for?"

"I don't know." Wolfe's eyes were narrowed at him. "Ask her. Her avowed purpose is open to question. This is futile, Mr. McLeod, since you think a righteous man may wink at murder. I wanted—"

"I didn't say that. I don't wink at murder. But I don't have to

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want whoever killed Kenneth Faber to get caught and suffer for it. Do I?"

"No. I wanted to see you. I wanted to ask you, for instance, if you know a man named Carl Heydt, but since—"

"I don't know him. I've never seen him. I've heard his name from my daughter; he was the first one she worked for. What about him?"

"Nothing, since you don't know him. Do you know Max Maslow?"

"No."

"Peter Jay?"

"No. I've heard their names from my daughter. She tells me about people; she tries to tell me they're not as bad as I think they are, only their ideas are different from mine. Now this has happened, and I knew it would, something like this. I don't wink at murder and I don't wink at anything sinful."

"But if you knew who killed that man or had reason to suspect anyone, you wouldn't tell me—or the police."

"I would not."

"Then I won't keep you. Good afternoon, sir."

McLeod stayed put. "If you won't tell me what my daughter came here for I can't make you. But you can't tell me she made false statements and not say what they were."

Wolfe grunted. "I can and do. I will tell you nothing." He slapped the desk. "Confound it, after sending me inedible corn you presume to come and make demands on me? Go!"

McLeod's mouth opened and closed again. In no hurry he got up. "I don't think it's fair," he said. "I don't think it's right." He turned to go and turned back. "Of course you won't be wanting any more corn."

Wolfe was scowling at him. "Why not? It's only the middle of September."

"I mean not from me."

"Then from whom? Mr. Goodwin can't go scouring the countryside with this imbroglio on our hands. I want corn this week. Tomorrow?"

"I don't see . . . There's nobody to bring it."

"Friday, then?"

"I might. I've got a neighbor— Yes, I guess so. The restaurant too?"

Wolfe said yes, he would tell them to expect it, and McLeod

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turned and went. I stepped to the hall, got to the front ahead of him to hand him his hat, and saw him out. When I returned to the office Wolfe was leaning back, frowning at the ceiling. As I crossed to my desk and sat I felt a yawn coming, and I stopped it.

A man expecting to be tagged for murder is in no position to yawn, even if he has had no sleep for thirty hours. I had my nose fill the order for more oxygen, swiveled, and said brightly, "That was a big help. Now we know about the corn."

Wolfe straightened up. "Pfui. Call Felix and tell him to expect a delivery on Friday."

"Yes, sir. Good. Then everything's jake."

"That's bad slang. There is good slang and bad slang. How long will it take you to type a full report of our conversation with Miss McLeod, yours and mine, from the beginning?"

"Verbatim?"

"Yes."

"The last half, more than half, is in the notebook. For the first part I'll have to dig, and though my memory is as good as you think it is, that will be a little slower. Altogether, say four hours. But what's the idea? Do you want it to remember me by?"

"No. Two carbons."

I cocked my head. "Your memory is as good as mine—nearly. Are you actually telling me to type all that stuff just to keep me off your neck until nine o'clock?"

"No. It may be useful."

"Useful how? As your employee I'm supposed to do what I'm told, and I often do, but this is different. This is our joint affair now—trying to save you from the calamity of losing me. Useful how?"

"I don't know!" he bellowed. "I say it *may* be useful, if I decide to use it. Can you suggest something that may be more useful?"

"Offhand, no."

"Then *if* you type it, two carbons."

I got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of milk. I might or might not start on it before four o'clock, when he would go up to the plant rooms for his afternoon session with the orchids.

(continued on page 109)

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The film critic was more than an eyewitness to a French movie . . .

SOMETHING LIKE MURDER

by JOHN LUTZ

I was leaning slightly from my fifteenth floor window in the Norwood Arms, watering my geraniums, when Mrs. Vixton passed by wearing a pink flower-print kimono of shimmering silk. She passed by vertically, you understand, not horizontally, which would have been much more conducive to her health though not nearly so remarkable.

She saw me, I believe, though to her I was of only passing interest. Still, I'm sure I saw a slight inclination of her head in my direction. Whatever else might be said of Mrs. Vixton, she was never a snob. She was descending face down, her arms spread incredibly wide, a frozen, determined expression on her face, as if she might yet have time to catch the knack of flying. Startled, I overwatered the geraniums. I didn't look down; there was no doubt of the outcome.

My name, incidentally, is Cy Cryptic. Not my real name, of course. I'm a movie reviewer for one of the larger papers here in town, and Cy Cryptic sounds and looks more like show biz than Marvin Haupt.

I'd have forgotten completely about Mrs. Vixton's death, except that cinematically it might have been effective, when a week later in the lobby I overheard a chance remark between Mrs. Fattler of the third floor and Gates the doorman.

". . . from her window . . ." I heard Mrs. Fattler say, dragging out her vowels as women often do when discussing a tragedy.

I edged closer. "Mr. Cryptic," Mrs. Fattler said in greeting, and Gates gave his ridiculous little salute. I joined the conversation.

Mrs. Vixton had committed suicide, I was told, by leaping from the south window of her apartment while the horrified Mr. Vixton looked on. A typewritten signed note was found later, expressing Mrs. Vixton's despondency and her desire to leave this world. I

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did not mention that I had seen Mrs. Vixton resplendent in mid-air the morning of her death. I did not think it wise in light of the fact that the Vixtons lived on the fourteenth floor, in the apartment *below* mine.

The matter of Mrs. Vixton's gravity-assisted death kept creeping into my mind that afternoon as I sat through an advance showing of *Life's Slender Thread,* a French import about, believe it or not, a man who pushes his mistress from a high window rather than turn her over to a gangland czar. It was a happy-ending film of unlikely gimmickry, small consequence, and incoherent subtitles.

Yet the movie did create a certain mood. When I left the theater I decided to call on Mr. Vixton before writing my copy.

Mr. Vixton was of medium-height, a pear-shaped man in his fifties, with a sleek set to his neck and shoulders that suggested that once he might have been lean and muscular. We shook hands and he invited me into his apartment, a twin to my own but for Vixton's tasteless and mismatched furniture on a riotous green-and-black carpet. The carpet alone might have driven Mrs. Vixton to suicide. But I knew that it wasn't suicide.

"Sit down, Cryptic," Mr. Vixton invited, waving a compact arm toward a low sofa with clear lucite arms.

I sat, glancing at the south window. "I'm sorry about your wife," I said. "Are you?"

Vixton stood with his arms crossed; he cocked his head, then laughed. There was something frog-like in his broad bespectacled features, his wide downturned mouth.

"I thought you might have seen me leaning out to water my geraniums," I said. "At any rate, I could never be sure you hadn't."

"And I could never be sure you didn't see my wife pass by you, Cryptic. Yours was the only window she had to pass above this fourteenth floor, after which it didn't matter. But as it happened, I did see your hand holding the watering can, some few seconds after Gloria's fall."

I leaned back in the gauche sofa and crossed my outstretched legs at the ankles. "I surmise that you pushed her from the roof."

"You surmise correctly. That way there would be no window frame for her to clamp onto, and no sign of a struggle in our apartment. I tricked her into signing the note I had typed, lured her onto the roof, then pushed her. None of it was difficult—

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certainly it was easier and more profitable for me than a divorce. What I'm curious about, Cryptic, is why you came down here and brought out in the open what both of us could only suspect—I that you did see Gloria pass your window, and you that I was aware that you had."

"I could never be sure you wouldn't kill me," I said candidly, "and if I went to the police with my story, they might not have believed me and you might have killed me out of revenge or to protect yourself, or possibly even sued me for libel."

"Truthfully," Mr. Vixton said, "I was considering the first alternative—to kill you. It was that glimpse of the watering can . . ." He frowned slightly, a toad-like contraction of his features. "But how does this visit improve the situation?"

"The situation, as I see it, is that we can't trust one another. You'll always feel I might go to the authorities, and I'll always feel you might do something drastic to preclude that eventuality. Now, what needs to be done is for circumstances to be arranged so that we *can* trust one another. Suppose you had something on me?"

Vixton puffed his cheeks and seemed to deliberate. "Something like murder?"

"There is a young woman named Alicia whom I often escort."

"I've seen her," Vixton said. "A charmer."

"Suppose I do away with Alicia in your presence, even let you photograph the event? That would make us even, so to speak, and we could be confident of each other's silence."

"It would be a standoff," Vixton said slowly, brightening to the idea. "Better than a standoff, actually, as I'd have absolute proof of your guilt. But what do you have against Alicia?"

"Absolutely nothing. She's merely convenient for our purpose."

I watched Vixton consider this, then saw his eyes darken at the sudden thought behind them. "I'm even more convenient than Alicia, Cryptic. Wouldn't it solve your problem if you"—he laughed a flat croaking laugh—"murdered me?"

"You're *too* convenient," I told him. "One: you're in the apartment below me; the police are bound to question me and suspect. Two: however deeply buried, I do have a motive. On the other hand, I'm only one of Alicia's many escorts, and she and I get along splendidly and always have."

Vixton nodded slowly. "It's crazy but it makes sense—if that makes sense."

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"It does," I assured him. "Alicia lives in a west-side penthouse apartment on the thirtieth floor. I'll arrange things so we can go there together tomorrow night, and she can meet the same fate as your late wife."

Vixton's broad face widened in a smile. He chuckled, then laughed aloud and went to the bar in the corner and poured us each a drink. We toasted tall buildings.

The next night Vixton and I took the elevator to the thirtieth floor of Alicia's building and walked down the deep-carpeted hall to the door labeled with her apartment number. She must have heard us coming, for as I raised my hand to knock, the door opened.

"Cryptic," she said, "how good to see you!"

But it was better to see her. She was slender and tan in a long pink dress, with honey-blonde hair cascading in carefully arranged wildness to below her shoulders. She wanted to be in films, and on looks alone she had a chance.

"This is Mr. Vixton," I told her, as Vixton and I stepped inside. "He's a film producer from Los Angeles here to consider some outdoor locales for a movie."

Alicia's eyes took on a special, harder light. "Which of the studios are you from?"

"I'm an independent producer," Vixton said smoothly. He regarded Alicia with what passed for professional interest. "According to Mr. Cryptic, you're a talented young woman."

"All she needs," I said with a smile, "is a little push."

Vixton coughed as Alicia led us out onto the balcony for drinks.

The balcony was large, bounded by a low iron rail on the east side and a four-foot-high stone wall on the north and south. Along the base of the iron rail ran a trough of rich earth from which grew a dense wall of green exotic foliage, including even two small trees. Like many cliff dwellers, Alicia was addicted to what green she could squeeze into her steel-and-cement-dominated existence.

Vixton had a martini, as did I. Alicia, as usual, drank a whiskey sour. I hastened to mix the drinks, my plan being to drop several capsules of a depressant into each of Alicia's whiskey sours. "Dangerous when mixed with alcohol," I had said to Vixton earlier, showing him a handful of the tiny capsules. "Downers in the true sense of the word."

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In the thin cool air of the balcony I heard Vixton's harsh voice rasp. ". . . going to be a great movie . . ." He actually seemed to be enjoying himself. Alicia was on him like wet clothes.

After the third whiskey sour Alicia's eyelids seemed unable to make it more than halfway over her beautiful blue orbs, and I nodded to Vixton. While he watched, I held Alicia by the waist and guided her toward the iron railing.

"Don' wanna dance," she protested.

Vixton readied his pocket camera as I positioned Alicia just so before the lush green wall of foliage beyond which was star-speckled night sky. "Cryptic!" she said, suddenly alarmed.

"Sorry, love," I said, and pushed with my right hand. There was a quick sharp flash.

Alicia disappeared between the dense green branches, tumbling backward. One high-heeled shoe flew off as her tanned ankles flicked through the thick green leaves and disappeared. I heard a trailing scream, punctuated by Vixton's, "Got it!"

I glanced through the branches and quickly turned my head. "Let's go!" I said to Vixton, but he was already at the door that led inside the apartment. We took our martini glasses with us and hastily wiped our fingerprints from whatever else we might have touched.

There was no one in the hall as we walked quickly along the spongy carpet to the elevator and punched the button. Within a few minutes we were descending to street level. Perspiration had boiled to beads on Vixton's flat forehead.

We left by the building's side exit, got in my car, and quickly, but not too quickly, drove away. As we rounded the corner and passed the front of the building we saw a knot of people and a bare tanned foot protruding from a fold of pink material on the sidewalk. I drove faster.

Two days later I gave Vixton the details of Alicia's funeral.

And that's how we accomplished it—the perfect crime. I got the idea from *Life's Slender Thread,* that abominable French film. Only instead of a thin nylon rope, as used in the movie, we used a net from which there was access to the open window of the vacant apartment below Alicia's. It's true that Alicia wants to break into movies, but as a stuntperson, as I suppose they're now called. As promised, I might be able to arrange something for her.

After being caught in the net, Alicia quickly climbed through the window below, then ran out into the hall where she took the

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service elevator to ground level with Vixton and me minutes behind her. She then faked a crowd-gathering fainting spell on the sidewalk directly below her balcony.

I no longer have anything to fear from Vixton, but just in case, I've moved out of the Norwood Arms and will be extremely difficult to locate. There was no way I could bear to kill Alicia, or even Vixton. Seeing that sort of thing done constantly on film is one thing, actually doing it another. I'm not a violent person; I like musicals.

My one concern is that Vixton will go to see *Life's Slender Thread*. But that isn't likely. Not after the review I gave it.

"Q"

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A *NEW* short-short by
R. L. STEVENS

Seven years in prison is a long time to brood—and think . . .

INNOCENT VICTIM

by R. L. STEVENS

Beautiful day, isn't it? There's nothing like walking up Fifth Avenue on a spring afternoon, feeling the first warm breeze of the year against your face, seeing the girls without the boots and scarves they've been wearing all winter.

Oh, I know it's no great treat for you, with your Fifth Avenue office. But I think during all those years in prison it was the thing I missed the most—just being able to walk along Fifth Avenue like this.

Yes, seven years is a long time. 2555 days, not counting Leap Years.

That's the time I served—more than 2500 days. That's what it worked out to, with time off for good behavior and all.

Seven years for a crime I didn't commit.

No, no, I'm not going to get into that old business again, certainly not tonight in front of your wife and family. A man invites me to dinner after seven years I know how to behave, believe me!

Another six blocks to the subway? I don't mind. I told you I'm enjoying the walk.

I didn't see many of the old crowd up at the office, but I suppose personnel changes. Always was a big turnover in the advertising business. Whatever happened to Randy?

Finally married her, huh? Well, I guess they deserved each other. She was a cute girl, though. I remember she used to wear blonde bangs that came just to the top of her eyes.

I suppose after Ned was killed they shifted her to another job. Can't be secretary to a dead man, can you?

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Funny thing, all during those seven years I kept thinking about the day it happened. She was at her desk outside his office and of course she heard us having the fight. She testified to it at the trial. I had this fight with him, then I left, and a half hour later she found him dead with that letter opener stuck into his heart. And no one else had entered the office in the meantime.

It was a circumstantial case, of course. No one saw me do it. But someone else could have come in through his private entrance during that half hour without being seen by her. But we'd been yelling at each other, and I ran out of the office afterwards. I just wanted to cool off—just walk the streets and cool off like we're doing now.

Try telling that to a jury—that you were just walking up Fifth Avenue. I tried telling the cops when they arrested me at my apartment later, but they didn't buy it either. I went into his office, I fought with him, and I ran out of the building. Nobody saw him alive again. That was the circumstantial case against me.

I know—I wasn't going to get into all this again. But more than 2500 nights in a cell is a long time to think about it.

What are you working on these days? Still got the Hammond cigarette account?

I remember you were doing a Hammond layout that afternoon. I stopped by your office to spout off on my way in to see Ned. It was always a good profitable account. That classy office you've got now is almost as big as Ned's used to be. I suppose with Ned killed and me in prison there was plenty of room for advancement.

No, I don't wish I was back. I never wish for what can't be. But I can't help thinking about those seven years, can I?

The hell of it is, I was indicted and tried for second-degree murder, but the jury convicted me of a lesser count of manslaughter. They were undecided between my being guilty or not guilty, so they compromised on manslaughter. My lawyer told me it happens a lot in circumstantial cases. They couldn't turn me loose, but they couldn't send me up for 20 years either. So manslaughter sounded just about right to them. And seven to fifteen years sounded just about right to the judge who sentenced me.

I guess they didn't think about it as more than 2500 days. And nights.

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This the subway?

So you've moved to Queens since I last knew you? Nice house, I'll bet. What do we take, the F train to Forest Hills? It's been a long time, but I guess things like the 53rd Street subway station never change.

You got tokens? Thanks, that's one I owe you.

These platforms sure get crowded during the rush hours.

You know, one thing kept me going during those seven years. It was the thought that I'd been wrongly convicted for killing a man. I figured if I ever got out, the state owed me one.

One what? Why, one killing, of course.

Killing the person who really did it.

I thought a lot about that too, about somebody walking around free while I sat in that cell for a crime I had never committed.

You see, this is the way I figured it. After I had the fight with Ned, it would have been just the most natural thing in the world for him to call in his secretary to talk about it, or to go out to her desk to talk about it. But he didn't do either. He never went out or buzzed her, and a half hour later she found him dead.

What do you think that means?

The way I see it, somebody else came in through the private door just as I left. That's why Ned didn't buzz her. Somebody came in to show him something—somebody in the agency because visitors had to go past his secretary. Somebody he worked closely with. That person killed him, knowing I'd be blamed.

Careful now, don't get too close to the edge when the train comes.

Who was it? Well, I remembered the police photographs of the office after the body was found. I remembered one thing in particular that didn't occur to me during the trial.

Standing on his couch was the Hammond cigarette layout you'd been working on earlier.

It was you who entered through his private door just as I was leaving. It was you who killed him.

And I've waited seven years for this.

Careful now, the train is coming.

Here it comes.

News item: *Ex-convict Killed in Fall from Subway Platform.*

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a *NEW* short story by
E. X. FERRARS

Peter Hassall was assigned to write a series of articles on unsolved murders. He began with the murder of Dr. Joseph Armiger five years ago in the village of Newton St. Denis. Now, Dr. Armiger had been a man of violent temper, but he also had had patience—and as Everard Crabbe told Hassall in the village pub, "That's a dangerous mixture, you know." Add subtlety and cunning—and you have a deadly brew . . .

THE FORGOTTEN MURDER

by E. X. FERRARS

When the *Evening Herald* commissioned Peter Hassall to write a series of articles on forgotten murders they did not, of course, expect him to solve the problems which, over the years, had baffled the police. What they wanted from him was simply an account of the after-effects that the murders had had on the communities in which they occurred. Had they truly been forgotten, or did people still talk about them? If they did, what were they saying now? Had they theories of their own about the truth of what had happened five, or ten, or even 20 years ago? Hassall was left to choose his murders for himself and without hesitation he decided that the first one he would investigate was that of Dr. Joseph Armiger, in the village of Newton St. Denis.

His reason for this was that Dr. Armiger was the only victim of a murder whom Hassall had ever met personally. It had been about seven years ago at a small party in Bournemouth, given by friends of Hassall's with whom he had been spending the weekend. Dr. Armiger at that time had been director of a research station near Bournemouth under the Agricultural Research Council, but he had been just about to retire and that evening he had talked a great deal about his retirement. He had talked with a refreshing lack of the fears and regrets that beset so many people at that stage of their lives.

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Dr. Armiger had been a short man, thin, very upright, brisk and abrupt in his movements, with a red, sharp-featured face, thick gray hair, and an amiable, animated manner. Hassall's friends told him that the amiability lasted just as long as no one opposed him, but that when someone did, his temper could flare up suddenly and alarmingly. He had already bought a cottage in Newton St. Denis, he told Hassall, where he was going to live with his sister and where he intended to create the most beautiful of gardens.

He had talked on and on about his plans for the garden. Hassall had not paid much attention at the time, for there had been a beautiful young woman in the room with whom he would far sooner have been talking. But when, about two years later, he read of Armiger's murder, he recalled the evening in Bournemouth and wondered how far that wonderful garden had progressed. Had Armiger achieved anything, or were two years too short a time for results to appear? Had the brief time of his retirement been wholly wasted?

His death had seemed a pure waste, a brutal and senseless tragedy. He had been on his way, late one summer evening, to post some letters in a mailbox near his cottage when he had been set upon by some person or persons unknown and battered to death. The police had tried to obtain information about a gang of boys on motorcycles who had been seen that evening driving wildly through the village; but although they had been traced it had been impossible to prove the guilt of any of them. Whatever suspicions of them the police had entertained, in the end they had to abandon the inquiry. No other suspects had been found and the affair dropped out of the newspapers.

Five years after the murder, driving down to Newton St. Denis, Peter Hassall did not give a thought to the possibility that he might discover the murderer. He assumed the boys on the motorcycles were responsible. But he was curious what impact that self-assertive little man had made on the village. Had he still been too much of a newcomer there for the slow village mind to have become fully aware of his existence, or had he already managed to impose himself on the community as he had certainly intended? Did his sister still live in the cottage? What did she believe or know about his murder?

That was something Hassall never discovered, for Miss Armiger had been dead for a year and was buried in the village church-

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yard. She seemed to be only vaguely remembered, but a neighbor thought she had heard that the old lady had died of a stroke. The cottage had been sold since her death and the people now living in it, a young couple with several young children, knew nothing about the Armigers. The garden that was to have been so beautiful was now laid out to vegetables, struggling up not too successfully through nettles and bindweed.

The vicar and the doctor were both new since the Armigers' time. The landlord of The Coach and Horses said he remembered Mr. Armiger, that he used to drop in from time to time for a pint, and that his death had been a bad business, the sort of thing to get the neighborhood a bad name, and that the police hadn't cracked down nearly hard enough on them hooligans.

One or two other village people whom Hassall questioned said more or less the same thing, but on the whole it was disappointing. There was no drama for him to write up, nothing personal about the victim to develop into a story. His own memory of Armiger seemed to be rather more vivid than that of the people among whom he had lived for two years. Regretfully Hassall began to think it best to leave Joseph Armiger in the oblivion in which he rested and go on to investigate the next unsolved murder on his list.

Then one morning he met Everard Crabbe.

They met in The Coach and Horses when Hassall had just made up his mind that after a drink and a sandwich he would drive back to London. There was no one else in the bar but the landlord, who came and went, attending to their wants but leaving Hassall and Crabbe mostly to themselves. Crabbe was sitting on a stool at the bar. He was a quiet-looking, shabby man of about 40, with a deeply lined, nervous face, scanty brown hair, and deepset, watchful blue eyes. He watched Hassall for some minutes before he spoke to him.

Then he said, "Good morning. My name's Crabbe—Everard Crabbe."

Very faintly a bell tinkled in Hassall's mind. He had a feeling he had heard the name, but he could not remember when or where.

"Good morning. Mine's Peter Hassall," he replied.

"I hear you've been asking questions about Dr. Armiger," Crabbe said.

It surprised Hassall to hear the dead man referred to as Dr.

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Armiger. In general the village had denied him the status of doctor, on the grounds that the title belonged only to members of the medical profession.

"Yes, but I haven't got very far with them," he said.

"Not police, are you?" Crabbe said. "Not after all this time."

"No, I'm a writer. I'm doing a series of articles on forgotten murders."

"Ah, that's what I thought. You've got the look. Possibly I could help you a bit. Not much, I'm afraid. I had some theories of my own at the time, but they were not based on anything you could call evidence. But if you'd be interested—" He paused hopefully, a lonely man probably, badly in need of someone to talk to.

Hassall did not think that anything useful would come out of it, but he was in no hurry and Crabbe's glass was empty. Offering him a drink, he found that Crabbe's preference was for a double whiskey.

Picking up his glass, Crabbe continued, "I hadn't been living here very long when it all happened. Only three or four years. That's nothing in a place like this. And I only knew Armiger casually. But talk gets around and everyone knew he'd a pretty good opinion of himself as a gardener. Not that he'd ever done much gardening before he came here, so far as anyone could make out, but he was going to rely on books and science. He'd been Director of some agricultural research station somewhere—you probably know that—and he was going to show the rest of us a thing or two.

"Of course the old people laughed at him. There wasn't anyone who could teach *them* anything. But it didn't worry him and he went to work and he was a very hard worker, they all admitted that, and he soon had things in what had just been a cabbage patch looking very promising. Of course he didn't mind how much money he spent. He ordered expensive varieties of plants and all kinds of fertilizers and so on and he took no notice of any advice he was given. Given half a chance, he'd lecture you for an hour on what you ought to be doing yourself. A very opinionated man."

"So he wasn't popular," Hassall said.

"Well, not exactly, no. Not that he ever did anyone any harm. That's to say, until his carnations were stolen. That's when the trouble began. Seems they were something very special, from some very special grower. I met him the day after it happened and he was choking with fury. Someone had come into his garden

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during the night and pinched the whole lot he'd just planted. He said he'd have his revenge.

"But there, you see, he was up against a difficulty, because just how do you recognize your own carnation plants when half the people in the neighborhood have them in their gardens? Not quite such remarkable ones, perhaps, but until they come into bloom, how are you going to distinguish one carnation from another? I pointed that out to him and he muttered, 'Just wait and see,' and walked on, muttering to himself. I didn't like the sound of it much, but what could I do? I didn't really believe he'd do anything."

"I've been told he had a violent temper," Hassall said.

"Oh, that's certain," Crabbe agreed. "But he also had patience, and that's a dangerous mixture, you know. It gives you the makings of a vengeful man. Vindictive and vengeful." He drank some of his whiskey. "He was both, as it turned out. We all thought he'd forgotten about it, but in fact he was just waiting for the annual flower show in the village to see who entered carnations. And there he recognized his own straight away. Anyway, they were the only ones in the show of the right variety and color. And they won first prize. Not that that's what he was interested in. He simply wanted the name of the man who'd entered them.

"It was Albert Riddle. He worked at the garage you'll have passed as you came into the village, and he happened to be a near neighbor of Armiger's. And the night after the show Armiger went into Riddle's garden and poured buckets of weed killer over his lettuces and peas and beans. Very special weed killer that a man like Armiger could know all about, that makes the ground you put it on sterile for years."

"But how did anyone know he'd done it, if he did it at night?" Hassall asked.

"He was seen," Crabbe said. "A couple of boys, coming home late from a dance in town, saw it all happen. Not that they understood what old Armiger was doing, watering Riddle's garden for him in the middle of the night, and they never thought of trying to stop him, but when everything in Riddle's garden went black and shriveled up and died, and he got very drunk in here one evening and made a scene, saying someone in the village must have the evil eye, they told him what they'd seen Armiger doing, and like Armiger before him, Riddle swore he'd have his revenge.

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"I was very much more worried than I'd been when Armiger said the same thing, because when Riddle got drunk he could be *very* violent. He'd been in the magistrate's court for it more than once, it wasn't just talk. So I thought someone ought to warn Armiger."

"Which you did," Hassall said.

"Yes, and that's when I learned it was true about the weed killer," Crabbe replied. "He told me about it, said he'd worked on producing it himself. He chuckled and said that would teach Riddle. Only Miss Armiger was worried when I told them the kind of man Riddle was and said she wished her brother would learn to forget and forgive occasionally. But he was crowing with triumph and said he'd still a trick or two up his sleeve if he had any more trouble from Riddle.

"And that night he had it. Riddle got into his garden and cut down a very lovely birch tree in it. Armiger had planted some other young trees after moving into the cottage, but the birch was the only mature one he had, and there it was in the morning, sawed off near the bottom and lying flat on the grass."

"Did someone see that happen too, or how did they know Riddle did it?" Hassall asked.

"No, no one saw it," Crabbe said, "but who else would have done a thing like that? It was sheer malice, you see. If the tree had been stolen we might have said it was the gypsies, taking it to saw up into logs and sell them. But there was something defiant about the way it had just been left lying there. Everyone knew it was Riddle."

"And what did Armiger do?"

"Nothing."

Hassall raised his eyebrows. "Was that in character?"

"No, it wasn't. That's just the point I was coming to," Crabbe said. "It wasn't, and I personally found something very disturbing about *that*. I've told you Armiger was a patient man and a vindictive one and I couldn't help remembering what he'd said about having another trick or two up his sleeve. I felt he'd something in store for Riddle which he wouldn't find at all nice when it happened, something even worse, perhaps, than having his garden sprayed with weed killer. But nothing happened until the pigs got into it."

"Pigs?" Hassall said. "Armiger let some pigs into Riddle's garden?"

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"So it was thought."

"That doesn't sound to me like Armiger's style."

"Exactly. That's what I said immediately. But no one would listen to me. The pigs belonged to a man called Deakin who owned the field behind Riddle's cottage. Deakin lived in a shack of sorts in the middle of the field and grew vegetables for market and kept a few chickens and pigs, and one night the pigs knocked down the fence round Riddle's garden and rooted up most of the things he'd got left in it and trampled down the rest. The place was a ruin. And everyone said it was Armiger who'd broken down the fence and made sure the pigs got in."

"But you didn't believe that."

"No, as you said, it wasn't Armiger's style. He was a fastidious man, subtle, cunning. If all Riddle's roses had suddenly developed blight, or his apples had all suddenly fallen off his trees, or something of that sort, I might have thought Armiger was at the bottom of it. But I've always believed the pigs got into Riddle's garden by themselves. There was an old sow among them and old sows, as you probably know, are very belligerent, very destructive, quite dangerous, really. I thought the whole affair was Riddle's own fault, for not keeping his fence in better order. But he was sure Armiger was responsible, that's the important thing. He wouldn't listen to reason. He breathed fire. He swore again he'd have his revenge. And only a week later Armiger was found dead near the letter-box, with his skull battered in."

At this point the landlord, who had been lingering behind the bar, finding small jobs to do in the way of polishing glasses and rearranging the sandwiches under a bell-jar, as if he wanted to hear what the two men were saying to one another, caught Hassall's eye and gave him a swift wink.

Hassall gave no sign of having observed it.

"So what you're telling me," he said, "is that Riddle was the man who murdered Armiger, that it wasn't the boys on the motorcycles at all."

"No, no, you mustn't jump to conclusions like that," Crabbe replied quickly. "All I'm telling you about is a sequence of events. It's just as possible that Riddle *didn't* kill Armiger, however murderously he was talking, as that Armiger didn't let the pigs into Riddle's garden."

"Logically, I'm sure you're right. But what did everyone believe?"

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Crabbe gave a grave shake of his head. "I'm afraid I must admit I don't really know much about it. As it happened, I wasn't very well just about then. I didn't go out much. A virus, the doctor said. There was a lot of it about the village at the time."

"What I don't understand, if what you're telling me is true," Hassall said, "is why the police didn't look into the conflict between the two men. Didn't they even suspect Riddle?"

"Perhaps they did. I don't know. Anyway, they didn't find out anything conclusive."

"So it was a victory of brawn over brains. You know, I find that depressing."

"Ah, as to that, I wouldn't be too sure." Crabbe paused. Gazing into the distance, he fingered his glass, which drew Hassall's attention to the fact that it was empty.

He had it refilled.

"What do you mean?" Hassall asked.

"Well, only a few days after Armiger's death, Riddle died, you see," Crabbe said. "Isn't that a remarkable thing?"

"Well, I don't know. People do die, don't they? What was there remarkable about Riddle's death?"

"Nothing, on the surface. He had this virus I told you was going about the village. As a matter of fact, he'd had it for a few weeks, off and on, before Armiger's death. Couldn't seem to shake it off. Gastric trouble, pains in his joints, and so on. Just the same as I got, only worse.

"Old Dr. Turner, who was still in practice here at the time, said it was a virus. That's what they say about everything they can't diagnose nowadays, isn't it? And they give you pills and if they don't work they give you some more of a different color and in the end you probably have to get well on your own, just as you always have.

"But Riddle *didn't* get well. He got steadily worse. And the worse he felt, the worse his temper got. The pigs getting into his garden was the last straw. He was like a maniac the last few days of his life. He may or he may not have attacked Armiger—I have no evidence on that point whatever—but I know he was in a terrible state and would have been capable of anything."

Hassall gave Crabbe a puzzled look. He was eyeing Hassall with his bright, watchful stare, as if to see how his story was affecting him.

"But are you implying that Armiger was somehow responsible

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for Riddle's condition?" Hassall asked. "You had this virus yourself. You're not suggesting that Armiger managed to give the whole village some mysterious infection."

"Of course not, no."

"Then what do you mean?"

Crabbe frowned broodingly into what was left of his whiskey. "As I said before, it's just a sequence of events. There may be nothing more to it than that. But I've given the matter a lot of thought and sometimes I can't help feeling there's a pattern in those events. I'll have to begin by making a confession. I stole a cucumber from Riddle's garden."

"A cucumber?" For the first time Hassall began to wonder how many drinks Crabbe had had before he himself had arrived at The Coach and Horses.

"Yes, a ridged cucumber," Crabbe replied. "The kind you can grow in the open. It was a hot summer that year, you may remember, and he had a particularly fine crop. One of the few things that hadn't been spoiled by Armiger's weed killer or the pigs. But Riddle was dead, you see, and it seemed a pity they should go to waste."

"Just a minute," Hassall said. "When was this? How soon after Riddle died?"

"It was the evening after the funeral. Several of us had been to it and we came in here afterwards to have a drink, and one drink led to another, as it tends to when you're feeling low, as you can't help doing after a funeral, and by the time we left we were all fairly drunk. There were about five of us, I think. I remember we started singing some hymn or other when we started home, feeling in a religious state of mind, and we passed Riddle's cottage, which we knew was empty, because his wife had gone to stay with her sister, and there were those cucumbers, looking fat and fine and tempting, where we could see them from the road, because there was only a low stone wall along the front of the garden. And someone, it may have been me, suggested we should nip in and help ourselves, so that's what we did. I took mine home and my wife and I had some of it in a salad that evening. And next morning we were both of us down with that virus."

"Mr. Crabbe," the landlord interrupted, "I've told you I went down with that virus myself and I didn't eat any cucumber."

"Coincidence." Crabbe's enunciation was not quite as clear as it had been. "Yours could have been a different kind of virus. It

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could have come from anywhere. People coming and going in here all the time from all over the country, you could have picked it up from any of them. It's a fact though, until my wife and I finished that cucumber we didn't begin to get well."

"What about the other four who were with you, singing hymns after the funeral and who helped themselves to cucumbers?" Hassall said. "Did they get ill?"

Crabbe wagged a finger at him. "They did, they did. That's just what I was going to tell you. Every one of them was smitten the next day by that virus. But none of us thought anything about it at the time. We took Dr. Turner's pills and gradually we got well. And I don't suppose I'd have given the matter another thought if I hadn't gone round one day to help Miss Armiger with her garden. Of course she couldn't cope with it herself and it was turning into a wilderness, so I offered to go and mow her lawn for her.

"The lawnmower was kept in the garden shed. I went in to get it and there on a shelf I saw two things, a sprayer and a can of some insecticide. But even then the penny didn't drop. After all, insecticide is a normal enough thing for any gardener to have around. But later, somehow, I got to brooding about it. I thought of the things they tell you about insecticides. D'you know, there was a time when brewers used to spray it on their hops, until it turned out that if you drank eight hundred gallons of beer it would kill you." He looked gloomily into his nearly empty glass.

"You brood too much, Mr. Crabbe," the landlord said. "Now why don't you go home and have a bit of lunch? Your missus'll be expecting you."

"That's right, she will." Crabbe finished his drink and got to his feet. "Nice to have met you, Mr.—Mr.—?"

"Hassall," Hassall said. "But just a minute. What was it in the end that made you think Armiger had been spraying poison over Riddle's cucumbers?"

"The way you jump to conclusions!" Crabbe exclaimed. "Have I said that's what he did?"

"It's what you implied."

Crabbe shook his head. "What I've been telling you is just a sequence of events. You can make what you like of it, so long as you don't quote me. I can rely on you not to quote me, can't I? I always regard my conversation as strictly confidential."

"Very well," Hassall agreed. "But what was the next event in the sequence?"

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"Well, something made me think I'd better take that bottle of insecticide to a chemist friend of mine and get him to tell me what it was, and he said it had some chemical in it called fluorophosphonate, which is lethal to things like aphids and in big enough quantities to humans, though it's quite harmless to plants. So d'you know what I did? I got into Riddle's garden again and cut all the remaining cucumbers and put them in a bonfire—just to be on the safe side, you know, not because I seriously thought there was anything the matter with them. And so that was the end of that."

"Leaving you without any real evidence of any kind."

"Not a shred, my dear chap, not a shred!" Crabbe beamed at Hassall suddenly with a look of great happiness. "Now I really must be going."

"But you did believe Armiger had been gradually poisoning Riddle with one cucumber after another, didn't you?" Hassall said.

"I seldom talk about my beliefs," Crabbe answered with dignity. "They're a private matter."

"All the same, what about Mrs. Riddle? Had Armiger anything against her, or didn't he mind if she died?"

"Mrs. Riddle never ate cucumbers. She said they gave her indigestion. I remember my wife and I had her to tea once and she wouldn't touch our cucumber sandwiches. So she was quite safe—from cucumbers, I mean."

"But why didn't you go to the police with your suspicions?" Hassall asked. "Not a word of this came out at the inquest, or later either, did it?"

"Well, they were both dead, weren't they, Armiger and Riddle?" Crabbe said. "And it wasn't going to make Mrs. Riddle or Miss Armiger any happier to think she'd been living with a murderer. Nice old ladies, both of them. No one would have wanted to upset them. So what was to be gained by saying anything? Good day to you now—Mr. Hassall, is it? I've enjoyed our talk."

Concentrating carefully on how he put one foot before the other, the quiet-looking, shabby man made for the door.

When it had closed behind him Hassall said, "You've heard this story he was telling me before, haven't you?"

"Well, it isn't always exactly the same."

"Is there a word of truth in it?"

The landlord began to polish an invisible spot on his shining counter, looking down intently at what he was doing.

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"It's true Mr. Armiger and Mr. Riddle are both dead," he said, "and died within a few days of one another. And it's true the old ladies were very well liked and everyone was sorry for them. Miss Armiger's dead now, of course, but Mrs. Riddle still lives in the village."

"So you all got together and decided to keep your suspicions to yourselves," Hassall said. "All except Everard Crabbe."

The landlord applied himself harder still to his polishing.

"Everard Crabbe," Hassall mused. "I seem to know that name, but I can't remember where I've heard it."

"He's a writer, like yourself," the landlord said. "Writes murder stories. I sometimes read them when I'm not busy. They're not bad, but as I see it, they're full of improbabilities. Bit too much imagination for his own good, if you ask me."

"Q"

"SHORTEST MYSTERY" CONTEST RESULTS

We received many responses to Reiner F. Hornig's *The Shortest Mystery Ever Told* in the February 1977 issue—from 16 states and even one from Malaysia. In the opinion of the editors, the following 8 readers were most ingenious in taking the story further. We are rewarding each of them with one-year subscriptions to EQMM. Those who are already subscribers will receive a year's extension of their present subscriptions. Thank you all!

B. Bishman, Massachusetts
Ralph Cook, Florida
John Large, Pennsylvania
John F. Levins, California
John A. Libertine, Jr., Massachusetts
Muncie D. Marder, California
Gerald G. Noblitt, Missouri
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a *NEW* short-short by
EDWARD WELLEN

Anne's Diner was the last stop before Devil's Pass. Known for her wisecracks and snappy comebacks, Anne knew how to handle the long-haul truckers who tried to make a pass . . .

DEVIL'S PASS

by EDWARD WELLEN

Location had a lot to do with the success of *Anne's Diner—Last Stop*. The stretch west, especially, was rough going—narrow, twisting, steep, and more often than not slippery. Nowhere along it to pull off for a nap. It took a clear, wideawake mind, a responsive body, and strong nerves to negotiate Devil's Pass and still make time.

But long-haul truckers stopped at Anne's Diner as much to feast their eyes on Anne as to get a good hot cup of coffee and a platter of lean bacon and eggs without runny yolks. She had a brassy personality and copper-haired good looks to match. The truckers got an earful as well as an eyeful. It had become a game, a tradition, for truckers to try and make a pass—and for Anne to put them in their place. She enjoyed it and it helped business.

Tonight was no different, though it seemed both better and worse. The barometer was way down and Anne was in top form. Everyone sat looking inward, not outward. The rivulets on the steamy windows showed wet darkness outside and the waiting lights of rigs. Those truckers who had just come through were glad to forget Devil's Pass and those who had yet to tackle it were putting off thought of it as long as they could. All were cheered by both Anne and her antagonist.

The trucker up at bat was a boastful, cocky young male animal. To tell the truth, Anne could have gone for him. He had the rough good looks she liked and it didn't matter that he seemed a bit too young for her. But she had something solid going with a

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contractor in town. Besides, she had to keep the game from getting serious or it would be bad for business.

She had more on her mind at the moment than the obvious passes of a passing stranger. But she kept up her end of the banter to the delight of the cheering section.

"You tell him, Anne."

She told him. "Sure I'll give you a date—753 B.C. That's when they built Rome."

"That's telling him, Anne."

The trucker flushed. "No, I mean me and you, Anne. That kind of date." He flashed a grin. "I promise you *we'll* make history."

"He's got you now, Anne."

Anne stiffened slightly. Nobody had her, now or ever. She was her own woman. She grinned back. "You're spinning your wheels, buster. As far as I'm concerned, you're already history."

"Right on, Anne."

The trucker did not yield easily; she had to hand him that. "Now, listen, Anne—"

"Sure, your Highness."

"Highness?"

"You're King of the Road, aren't you?"

"Anytime you want some royal lovin', honey, just let me know." He shoved his sleeve up to save it from a wet spot and rested his elbow on the counter.

Anne stared at the muscular forearm. He smiled, but it was the tattoo he had bared that had caught her eye. She reached out with a finger and tapped the tattoo.

She kept her voice light. "Why the bugle?"

With a straight face he told her a few lies first—that the bugle was there to wake him in time to roll after a night of love, that it was there to sound the alarm whenever some dame spoke of marriage, that it was there to play taps when an affair ended. But then he told her, kidding on the square, that it wasn't a bugle, it was a post horn, and it was there because his name was Horn. William Horn. "Bill to you, honey."

He looked around smiling when she failed to come up with a snappy comeback. He was in the driver's seat. Anne was aware that for the first time in memory she must seem at a loss to the regulars, flustered, vulnerable.

A crash in the kitchen gave her an excuse to break off.

"Don't go away, your Highness. I'll be right back."

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The door swung to behind her and she stood still, staring at Doc, who knelt picking up pieces of crockery. His gaze slid away from hers. It came slowly back as she stood there not looking at him but through him.

Doc breathed easier. "For a minute there, Anne, I thought you were going to crawl my frame over the plate I dropped."

Anne eyed the pieces impatiently. "That? Forget it."

That nerved him to go on. He stood up eagerly. "It wasn't my hands. The plate was greasy. We have to get better pearldiver." He wiped his hands on his apron and held them out. His fingertips were blurs. "You'll see. I'll be fine. I haven't had a drop since you told me what you would need me for. I'll be over the shakes tomorrow in plenty of time to do it." He grew bolder in face of her silence, almost demanding in tone. "Of course, I'll have to go into town to get the instruments. And you'll have to give me the money. Let's see, I'll need . . ."

His voice trailed off but he tried to hold a smile in place. "Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying? Where have you gone to?" He sang a phrase in a cracked voice. " 'Annie doesn't live here any more.' That was a pop song—before your time."

Anne came back from where she had been and eyed him levelly. " 'Physician, heal thyself.' That's an old saying that means you're hanging on after your time."

Doc lost his hold on the smile. "You can be hard, Anne, and heartless."

"I can be realistic, you mean, and practical." She made a face at herself. "I'm sorry, Doc. I don't know why I'm taking it out on you, but you know what I have on my mind."

"I understand, Anne. That's all right."

She patted his narrow shoulder. "Take care of out front, will you, while I run out back?"

He nodded and she made for the rear door. She stopped herself, and him too.

"Oh, just in case. How many of those pills do I slip Jane if she goes hysterical on me again? I want it to work fast—knock her out in, say, five minutes. I can't spare the time to stay with her."

Doc frowned. "Well, if you absolutely have to. Let's see, for someone slight as Jane I'd say five should do it."

Anne nodded and went out. She crossed to her living quarters—a double-size mobile home on a concrete-block founda-

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tion. At the door she stopped in spite of the cold drizzle and looked back at the parked rigs. None of the truckers was pulling out yet. Her smile got snarled up. They were all waiting for the finish of her match with Bill Horn. She let herself in.

The night light showed her that her kid sister lay curled up in bed. Jane had gone back to her childhood and earlier—night light and fetal position. Jane's suitcase remained half unpacked.

"Jane."

Jane was not sleeping. Slowly she rolled her head to stare blankly at Anne. "Yes?"

"How are you feeling?"

"All right." Dull eyes, dull voice.

"That's good." While she talked Anne busied herself finishing Jane's unpacking. "Doc will take care of it tomorrow. This is a nice clean place. It'll go fine. Doc was good once, you know—one of the best. It wasn't his fault he cracked up." But Anne was already having second thoughts. Maybe she should take a day off, drive into the city, and arrange a legal abortion "for reasons of the mother's mental health." But that could wait till tomorrow. Right now she had another point to settle.

She closed the dresser drawer. "There." She stood looking down at Jane. "You say that while you were going around together he called himself Bill Harrison, but that after he ditched you and you tried to trace him, you found that wasn't his real name. Is that right?"

Slowly Jane rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling. "That's right."

"You mentioned that he has a tattoo on his forearm—a tattoo of a bugle. Is that right?"

Jane rested both hands on her belly. "That's right." Then, almost indifferently, "Why?"

Grief tore at Anne's insides. Janie didn't live there any more. Not the Janie she had known. Anne knew why. It was that smiling animal in the diner. Anne had felt sure of it. But she had had to feel surer to do what she was going to do.

She gave a half-careless, half-angry laugh. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I was thinking of maybe hiring a private eye. But at this point there doesn't seem any point in it, does there?"

"No, I guess not." Empty eyes, empty voice.

Anne let pressure come out as a sigh. "Close your eyes and try to get some sleep." She touched her cold hand to Jane's hot brow.

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"I'll look in on you again. Remember, baby, you're not alone."

She palmed the bottle of pills from the dresser top as she left. Once outside she locked the door as quietly as she could.

A glance at the parking area showed her all the rigs were still there. She felt the cold tears of the drizzle on her face as she hurried back to the diner. In the kitchen she picked up a clean cloth and patted her face and hair dry. Then out front.

Anne's nod answered Doc's look as they switched. She turned on her smile for the truckers—and for Horn.

Horn grinned back. "Well, Anne, you been thinking it over? Did you decide you're going to be sweet to me?"

"That's just what I decided." Anne spoke slowly, drawing it out as her hands busied themselves out of sight. Under the counter she crushed pills into a coffee cup. For Jane, five; that meant double should do the job for Horn. She lifted the cup to the spout of the coffee machine and filled it, then put in three teaspoons of sugar and set the cup in front of him with a swirling flourish. "You earned yourself one on the house with lots of sugar."

Horn scowled, then joined in the laughter. Only when he downed the coffee did Anne let out her breath.

The game had ended. The diner filled with so longs, and emptied.

Anne abandoned the cash register and stood at the open door to wave and watch. She saw Horn climb into the cab of his tractor-trailer. She waited. Why was it taking him so long to get his rig going? Had the doctored coffee hit him too soon? Then the exhaust flamed and the rig rumbled and the wheels hissed free.

Her gaze fixed on the rig as it followed the shining blackness up through Devil's Pass. She tracked the dwindling sweep of headlights and the bunching cluster of taillights as the rig climbed the night, reaching the dangerous dip.

Then it came—the sight of the sudden failure to make the hairpin turn, the crash through the guardrail, the plunge down sheerness, and the final flaming. Now the sound of it shook her.

Had Jane heard it? No, it had been fainter than it seemed; she herself had heard it only because she was listening for it. But truckers and highway cops would shortly bring the echo back to Anne's Diner. What lies would she have to tell Jane to keep her from ever finding out who the driver had been?

She broke loose and ran around back, unlocked the door of her quarters.

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"Jane . . ."

But Janie wasn't there any more. The dresser drawer stood crookedly open, empty but for a dangling stocking. The suitcase was gone. A chair rested up against the open window. Before climbing out, Jane had found a pencil stub and a scrap of paper and had weighted the note down with an ashtray.

Anne—Your questions and your locking me in made me wonder. I looked out and saw Bill's rig. He's going to find me waiting in his cab. When he learns about the baby, maybe we can make a life together . . .

"Q"

ANNE BRASHLER CONTEST RESULTS

In the March 1977 issue of *EQMM* we ran a story titled "The Empty Chair" by Anne Brashler—a strange, perplexing story whose meaning the author herself gave to be: "Since rules and regulations are created by humans, they are meant to be questioned by humans."

With that as a hint, we invited your further interpretations of the story, with the promise of an award of $50 each to the 3 the editors considered the most interesting. The response was amazing.

We received more than 1,000 replies, from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and, among other places, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Singapore. It has taken long careful consideration but we finally have chosen the 3 interpretations we consider the most interesting. Our congratulations to:

Mrs. R. W. Collins, Lusk, Wyoming
Nancy Nuss, Lakewood, California
Barbara B. Shulman, Palo Alto, California

Our thanks to all who entered the contest. The extraordinary range and quality as well as the number of responses made choosing only 3 of the hundreds of fascinating interpretations one of the greatest challenges of our editorial lives.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 483rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . One of fiction's greatest qualities—perhaps its greatest—is to let the reader discover how the events of life can change the potential of character . . .

The author, John F. Mauren, is in his early fifties. He "was born and raised in a newspaper publishing family in a small town in Michigan." During World War II he served for three years in the U. S. Army, two of them in Europe. He is a graduate of Michigan State University, with a B.A. in Journalism.

After sixteen years of editing the family newspaper, he went to work for the Michigan Department of Labor and is now Chief of the Safety Education and Training Division. His hobbies are spectator sports and Big Band Era records (there's a story there—about the Big Band Era). He and his wife and two children spend summer weekends in their cottage in northern Michigan where they "enjoy fishing, boating, and the great outdoors" . . .

THE TURNING POINT

by JOHN F. MAUREN

Clint and the intruder stood facing each other in the twilight of the large living room. The two-story home had been in Clint's family since 1900, but it was becoming more and more rundown in the plight of a changing neighborhood.

"How in hell did you get in here?" Clint demanded, his anger slightly tempered by the sight of the gun the stranger was pointing at him.

"Just cool it, man," the intruder said as he waved the gun in Clint's direction.

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Clint, the taller of the two, surveyed the man in front of him. He was probably in his late twenties. He wasn't wearing a mask, and his jeans and jacket suggested that he had burglarized a rummage sale in a disadvantaged area. His face was thin and covered by a beard that was doing poorly. His eyes reflected an inner conflict between panic and bravado, a trait Clint had seen many times during his service in Vietnam.

"Move back." The man's voice was low and forced. He rested one hand on the dust-covered table next to a stack of dirty dishes and empty beer cans.

The soles of Clint's tennis shoes slid grudgingly over the carpet as he shuffled backward a couple of steps. "What are you doing here?" he asked brusquely.

"I didn't think anyone lived here," the stranger replied, quickly glancing around the room. Then he added, "Your cleaning lady must have quit."

"You can leave if you don't like it."

"I don't want to stay any longer than I have to."

"Great. There's nothing you'd want here anyway."

"Try me. Empty your pockets."

"That's just nickel and dime stuff."

"It adds up."

"Look," Clint said, "it's getting late." His arrogance was deliberate.

"Get your hands up," the man said impatiently.

"You wanted me to empty my pockets."

"I think I'm going to shoot you instead."

Clint's eyes widened slightly and a well-rehearsed frown appeared through the blond hair which hung over his brow. He quickly put his arms at about half-mast. The sleeves of his worn pullover receded just enough to reveal a wrist watch.

"You're too modest about your worldly possessions," the man said with mocking sincerity. "Stretch your arms out in front of you and slip the watch off, then lay it on the floor."

It was the watch Joan had given Clint on their fifth wedding anniversary, about a month before her death. Clint clenched his teeth as he recalled he had given her a pair of earrings.

He slipped off the watch and placed it on the floor. Anger pressed on him from inside, and the sensation partially counteracted the nothingness he had known for weeks.

The other man scooped up the watch, and Clint wished he

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hadn't given it up so easily.

"You've got the best thing I own. Now get out."

"That was just for starters."

"Don't push your luck."

The intruder's eyes narrowed as he said, "I can make your death wish come true."

Death. Clint hadn't really worried about it. Since Joan died, life had been more of a threat than death. Chuckie had been about his only link with reality. The boy was only three and hadn't done too badly in adjusting to the loss of his mother. Or had he? Clint really hadn't paid that much attention, except for an occasional piggyback ride and making the sloppy joes and chocolate milk.

The sudden realization of the extent of his responsibilities sent chills through Clint's body.

"Your billfold," the stranger demanded, making a sharp motion with the gun.

"I haven't worked in weeks," Clint said.

"Your billfold is bulging in your pocket. Put it on the floor. I'll take the pack of cigarettes in your shirt pocket too." The man wiped the back of his hand over his nose.

"These cigarettes are too tame for you. You must want them for your kids."

"Okay, bigmouth, you're getting it."

"Forget I said it." Clint lowered his left hand and reached into his back pocket for the billfold. He struggled to pry it out of his tight-fitting pants.

"Never mind. I'll drop you and take it myself," the man snapped, again making a menacing gesture with the gun. Clint had interpreted the previous threats to be lukewarm, but now the man's mouth tightened and his eyes were fixed hard in anticipation of pulling the trigger. The gravity of the situation telegraphed stinging impulses of danger in Clint's direction.

"Wait," Clint said seriously. "I've got a kid to take care of." Clint was surprised that the words had come out of him.

The stranger shook his head. "I've got to do it. You can identify me."

"Dammit, why didn't you wear a stocking mask?"

The man shrugged. "I'm sorry for your kid."

"You actually mean it, don't you? You're going to do it. Look, my wife's insurance money is in the bank. I'll mail it to you anywhere you say . . . I'm begging you."

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Clint was now pulling frantically at the billfold. His fingers slipped over the smooth leather. The threads at the corners of his pocket popped as his hand plunged deeper. He expected the piercing jolt of a bullet at any instant. Then with a desperate jerk the billfold was free. Clint dropped it on the floor between himself and the intruder.

The man's eyes had followed every move intently. He took a step forward and with a sweeping motion went eagerly for the billfold.

Clint's move was automatic but a little rusty. It would have been smoother in Vietnam. He lunged at the other man and grasped for the weapon. He missed the gun but caught the sleeve of the man's jacket and pulled him to the floor. He clutched the cool thin wrist in back of the gun. Clint was giving his adrenal glands everything they needed: fear, hate, pride.

He scrambled over the body beneath him with now-or-never determination. His hand moved over the intruder's face, his fingers passing over the hard teeth, the wet nose, and then he felt the eyes. Clint applied pressure to the small moist objects quivering under his fingertips.

"Drop it," Clint grunted. The man beneath him didn't submit. Clint applied more pressure and then with a gasp the man released the gun. Clint grabbed it and jumped to his feet. He pointed the gun at the figure writhing on the floor. "Get up," he ordered, feeling a beautiful exhilaration spreading through him. The man slowly joined his hands behind his head as tears trickled over his tortured face.

Clint took a deep breath. He was pleased with his control of the situation and of himself. He was in charge again.

"This is more like it," he sighed, moving his shoulders back. He adjusted his aim to the man's midsection and said, "I ought to blow you in two."

Clint thought a second, then added, as if reassuring himself, "I can, you know. You're in my house." Back when the neighborhood had started to go downhill, the word got around that if you shot a burglar, make sure he was inside, not outside, your house.

Clint's captive took one hand from behind his head and gently ran the back of it over his face to wipe away the tears. He strained to peer at the gun in Clint's hand. "Careful with that thing," he cautioned, "it's got a hair-trigger."

"Tough luck, fellow. It's your gun, not mine. Let's just test it.

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I'll start squeezing the trigger slowly and you tell me when you think it's going off."

"Easy, man, easy," the intruder pleaded.

"You're going to be sorry you picked this house," Clint said.

"What's the difference? No one got hurt, right?"

"Wrong. You're leaving here in a coroner's cart."

"Man, you're really uptight."

"You were going to kill me."

"I should have," the man mumbled.

"You had your chance."

"You begged me not to," the man countered.

"Now you beg me," Clint said coolly.

"Maybe getting totaled is better than the slammer," the intruder managed in a voice that sounded distant.

"What's your racket? What did you do before you bungled this thing?" Clint asked.

"College. Environmental major. Not many jobs, so I went to work in a supermarket."

"Let me guess," Clint interrupted. "You were a night cashier and you made out big." Clint's remark drew no response.

The scene had a certain familiarity for Clint—the vanquished form before him, poorly clothed, hands clasped behind his head. Clint would either shoot him or send him to join the montage of vague faces in the stockade. But I can't kill him, Clint thought. When two losers meet head-on, the winner has to be magnanimous. It was a rule he had just made up, but he liked it. It was good to win again and he would have to try it more often.

Then Clint's thoughts were suddenly disintegrated by a small voice. "Daddy, I've got to go to the bathroom."

Clint flinched. My God, he thought, I forgot about Chuckie being in bed.

"Stay upstairs, Chuckie. I'll be there in a minute."

"Daddy, are you going to sit in the dark again tonight?"

If Clint was still clinging to the nightmare he had been a part of the last few months, the boy's perception had freed him. "No, Chuckie, we're going to have the lights on all over the house," he answered.

Clint focused on his prisoner. The raised arms were growing heavy, the tired face was sagging. "I don't need you any more," Clint said firmly. Then he backed slowly across the room toward the telephone.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 484th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . An it-could-happen-to-you story—anywhere, anytime . . .

The author, Patricia J. Thurmond, is in her thirties, the divorced mother of two young daughters. She has taught at a Junior High School in California and is now teaching fifth and sixth grades in Chicago. She has a B.A. in English and an M.A. in Education.

Her hobbies include sewing, fashion designing, and interior decorating. She once founded a knitting club cleverly called the "Knit-Wits."

We welcome another "promising Patricia" to our ever-growing family circle . . .

IF CORNERED, SCREAM

by PATRICIA J. THURMOND

On the night it happened she hurried across the hospital parking lot, unlocked her car door, and got in. She started the car, waved to her co-workers, honked to the security guard, and drove the half block to the freeway entrance. The late hour meant light traffic. And though she was a good driver, she was always relieved whenever she had negotiated an entrance ramp. That done, she settled back, driving easily.

Then in the dim dashboard light she saw the gas gauge indicating empty and remembered with annoyance that she hadn't had time to stop for gas. Working a late shift at the hospital was not an ideal situation, but it meant more money and allowed her to attend graduate classes during the days.

As she drove, she found herself death-gripping the steering wheel and made a conscious effort to relax and think pleasant thoughts. Each night during the drive home, she relived the

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safety lectures given to the nurses—make sure someone on the ward knows where you are at all times; leave the grounds in groups; avoid isolated places in the hospital; if cornered, scream. She could still see the faces, hear the women whose bruised, often bloodied bodies gave vivid evidence of muggings and beatings. That there were so many victims, many of whom were her own age, added to her fears. Most distressing of all to treat were the children who had been brutalized.

Again she deliberately relaxed her grip on the wheel and took a deep breath.

Funny, she thought, she didn't know why, but she was even more uptight tonight than usual. She was tired and looked forward to a long soak in the tub with her new bath gel. While she soaked she planned to skim through her new magazine which had lain unread the last three days.

The gas gauge again caught her attention. She could probably make it home on what was still left in the tank, but she would have to fill up before class in the morning. If she stopped at the station that Gabriel ran on Imperial Highway tonight, she'd have a few extra minutes in the morning and wouldn't have to rush.

She approached Imperial Highway, flicked on the right blinker, headed down the off-ramp, checked the stop-light, and made a left turn. Leveling off in the right lane, she watched for Ann Avenue on Imperial Highway. She crossed Ann and pulled into the station at a pump. She rolled down the window as Gabriel walked to the car.

Since he always spoke pleasantly on the nights she stopped for gas, she had automatically discounted the few disturbing rumors that accompanied his sudden appearance in the area.

"Hi, Florence Nightingale. Fill 'er up?"

"Hi, Gabriel. Yes, fill it up, please."

As she handed him the gas-tank key, he asked, "Any more ping-pong playing under the hood?"

"No, no more noise. It stopped whenever you did whatever you did."

Gabriel filled the tank, cleaned the windows and mirrors, and gave her the change from a twenty. When he finished he said offhandedly, "By the way, my birthday was Sunday. Why don't you step inside the office and see what my sister gave me? You won't believe your eyes!"

"Oh, Gabriel, I'm in a really big hurry. I just can't stop tonight.

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But I will next time. I promise."

"Aw, come on. It won't be new any more by then. Besides, this is something extra-special. Come on. Only take a second."

As she and Gabriel talked back and forth, she realized she was wasting more time than if she went in and saw the silly gift.

Looking more agreeable than she felt, she said, "Okay, you win, Gabriel. Remember, this better be good!"

"It is. You'll see. Oh, before you get out, angle the car over this way—just in case anyone wants to pull in." Watching his gestures, she parked the car and followed him to the station office.

Once inside, Gabriel locked the door and quickly took a gun out of the drawer. Through the roar of her heartbeat in her ears she heard him say that there was no birthday and no present. Her fingers tingled. Nausea pitched and rolled through her body like seasickness. Each time the nausea crested, her legs felt like loosened moorings.

Her nose and toes were cold and she knew clinically, almost like an observer, that she was experiencing the symptoms of shock. She was unable to make a self-protective move, or even to scream. She tried to prepare to die, but didn't know how. Crazily, in the midst of her silent hysteria, the absurdity of it struck her, and she had a demented desire to laugh. Gabriel's lips were moving but she still couldn't hear above the roar in her ears.

Finally she heard sounds coming from his mouth. The sounds became words as her head cleared, and the words began to make sense.

". . . sorry I had to scare you by telling you that. But don't feel bad, I was scared myself when I saw that dude on the floor in the back of your car. I had you angle the car that way so that I can see both doors from here. And if he tries to get out, he belongs to me. I'll call the cops now. It's okay. Good thing you stopped for gas tonight."

In a few minutes she was aware of the sirens, the flashing lights of the squad cars, and the bellow of the bullhorn.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 485th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the poignant, moving story of Alice Whitehead, an unsophisticated farm girl who has run off to the big city . . .

The author, Barbara Owens, is in her early forties, "a housewife with a fine arts degree in drama." She is an "avid reader and bridge player, and enjoys the outdoors and travel." She and her husband are originally from Illinois and they have two teenage sons.

Since she started devoting her time to writing—"for a year now"—she has "never been happier at work," and she writes every moment she can spare. Which is good news indeed for the future—for all the readers on our staff agreed that Barbara Owens' first story is "something special" . . .

THE CLOUD BENEATH THE EAVES

by BARBARA OWENS

May 10: I begin. At last. Freshborn, dating only from the first of May. New. A satisfying little word, that "new." A proper word to start a journal. It bears repeating: I am new. What passed before never was. That unspeakable accident and the little problem with my nerves are faded leaves, forgotten. I will record them here only once and then discard them. Now—it's done.

I have never kept a journal before and am not sure why I feel compelled to do so now. Perhaps it's because I need the proof of new life in something I can touch and see. I have come far and I am filled with hope.

May 11: This morning I gazed long at myself in the bathroom mirror. My appearance is different, new. I can never credit myself with beauty, but my face is alive and has lost that indoor pallor. I was not afraid to look at myself. That's a good sign.

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I've just tidied up my breakfast things and am sitting at my little kitchen table with a steaming cup of coffee. The morning sun streams through my kitchen curtains, creating lacy, flowing patterns on the cloth. Outside it's still quiet. I'm up too early, of course—difficult to break years of rigid farm habits. I miss the sound of birds, but there are several large trees in the yard, so perhaps there are some. Even a city must have some birds.

I must describe my apartment. Another "new"—my own apartment. I was lucky to find it. I didn't know how to find a place, but a waitress in the YWCA coffee shop told me about it, and when I saw it, I knew I had to have it.

It's in a neighborhood of spacious old homes and small unobtrusive apartment houses; quiet, dignified, and comfortably frayed around the edges. This house is quite old and weathered with funny cupolas and old-fashioned bay windows. The front and side yards are small, but the back is large, pleasantly treed and flowered, and boasts a quaint goldfish pond.

My landlady is a widow who has lived here for over 40 years, and she's converted every available space into an apartment. She lives on the first floor with several cats, and another elderly lady lives in the second apartment on that floor. Two young men of foreign extraction live in one apartment on the second floor, and I have yet to see the occupant of the other. I understand there's also a young male student living in part of the basement.

That leaves only the attic—the best for the last. It's perfect; I even have my own outside steps for private entry and exit. Because of the odd construction of the house, my walls and ceilings play tricks on me. My living room and kitchen are one large area and the ceiling, being under the steepest slope of the roof, is high. In the bedroom and bath the roof takes a suicidal plunge; as a result, the bedroom windows on one wall are scant inches off the floor and I must stoop to see out under the eaves, for the ceiling at that point is only four feet high. In the bath it is the same; one must enter and leave the tub in a bent position. Perhaps that's why I like it so much; it's funny and cozy, with a personality all its own.

The furnishings are old but comfortable. Everything in my living-room area is overstuffed, and although the pieces don't match, they get along well together. The entire apartment is clean and freshly painted a soft green throughout. It's going to be a delight to live here.

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I spent most of yesterday getting settled. Now I must close this and be off to the neighborhood market to stock my kitchen. I've even been giving some thought to a small television set. I've never had the pleasure of a television set. Maybe I'll use part of my first paycheck for that. Everything is going to be all right.

May 12: Today I had a visitor! The unseen occupant from the apartment below climbed my steps and knocked on my kitchen (and only) door just as I was finishing breakfast. I'm afraid I was awkward and ill-at-ease at first, but I invited her in and the visit ended pleasantly.

Her name is Sarah Cooley. She's a widow, small and stout, with gray hair and kind blue eyes. She'd noticed I don't have a car and offered the use of hers if I ever need it. She also invited me to attend church with her this morning. I handled it well, I think, thanking her politely for both offers, but declining. Of course I can never enter a car again, and she could not begin to understand my feelings toward the church. However, it was a grand experience, entertaining in my own home. I left her coffee cup sitting on the table all day just to remind myself she'd been there and that all had gone well. It's a good omen.

I must say a few words about starting my new job tomorrow. I try to be confident; everything else has worked out well. I'm the first to admit my getting a job at all is a bit of a miracle. I was not well prepared for that when I came here, but one trip to an employment agency convinced me that was pointless.

Something must have guided me to that particular street and that particular store with its little yellow sign in the window. Mr. Mazek was so kind. He was surprised that anyone could reach the age of 32 without ever having been employed, but I told him just enough of my life on the farm to satisfy him. He even explained how to get a Social Security card, the necessity of which I was not aware. He was so nice I regretted telling him I had a high-school diploma, but I'm sure he would never have considered someone with a mere eighth-grade education. Now my many years of surreptitious reading come to my rescue. I actually have a normal job.

May 13: It went well. In fact, I'm so elated I'm unable to sleep.

I managed the bus complications and arrived exactly on time. Mr. Mazek seemed pleased to see me and started right off addressing me as Alice instead of Miss Whitehead. The day was over before I realized it.

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The store is small and dark, a little neighborhood drugstore with two cramped aisles and comfortable clutter. Mr. Mazek is old-fashioned and won't have lunch counters or magazine displays to encourage loitering; he wants his customers to come in, conduct their business, and leave. He's been on that same corner for many years, so almost everyone who enters has a familiar face. I'm going to like being a part of that.

Most of the day I just watched Mr. Mazek and Gloria, the other clerk, but I'm convinced I can handle it. Toward the end of the day he let me ring up several sales on the cash register, and I didn't make one mistake. I'm sure I'll never know the names and positions of each item in the store, but Mr. Mazek says I'll have them memorized in no time and Gloria says if she can do it, I can.

I will do it! I feel safer as each day passes.

May 16: Three days have elapsed and I've neglected my journal. Time goes so quickly! How do I describe my feelings? I wake each morning in my own quiet apartment; I go to a pleasant job where I am needed and appreciated; and I come home to a peaceful evening of doing exactly as I wish. There are no restrictions and no watchful eyes. It's as I always dreamed it would be.

I'm learning the work quickly and am surprised it comes so easily. Gloria complains of boredom, but I find the days too short to savor.

Let me describe Gloria: she's a divorced woman near my own age, languid, slow-moving, with dyed red hair and thick black eyebrows. She's not fat, but gives the appearance of being so because she looks soft and pliable, like an old rubber doll. She has enormous long red fingernails that she fusses with constantly. She wears an abundance of pale makeup, giving her a somewhat startling appearance, but she's been quite nice to me and has worked for Mr. Mazek for several years, so she must be reliable.

I feel cowlike beside her with my great raw bones and awkward hands and feet. We're certainly not alike, but I'm hoping she becomes my first real friend. Yesterday we took our coffee break together, and during our conversation she stopped fiddling with her nails and said, "Gee, Alice, you know you talk just like a book?" At first I was taken aback, but she was smiling so I smiled too. I must listen more to other people and learn. Casual conversation does not come easily to me.

Mr. Mazek continues to be kind and patient, assuring me I am learning well. In many ways he reminds me of Daddy.

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I've already made an impression of sorts. Today something was wrong with the pharmaceutical scales, so I asked to look at them and had them right again in no time. Mr. Mazek was amazed. I hadn't realized it was a unique achievement. Being Daddy's right hand on the farm for so many years, there's nothing about machinery I don't know. But I promised I wouldn't think about Daddy.

May 17: Today I received my first paycheck. Not a very exciting piece of paper, but it means everything to me. I hadn't done my figures before, but it's apparent now I won't be rich. And there'll be no television set for me. I can manage rent, food, and few extras. Fortunately I wear uniforms to work, so I won't need clothes soon.

Immediately after work I went to the bank and opened an account with my check and what remains of the other. I did that too without a mistake. And now it's safe. It looks as though I've really won; they would have come for me by now if she had found me. I'm too far away and too well hidden. Bless her for mistrusting banks; better I should have taken it than some itinerant thief. She's probably praying for my soul. Now, no more looking back.

May 18: I don't work on weekends; Mr. Mazek employs a part-time student. I would rather work since it disturbs me to have much leisure. It's then I think too much.

This morning I allowed myself the luxury of a few extra minutes in bed, and as I watched the sun rise I noticed an odd phenomenon beneath the eaves outside my window. Because of their extension and perhaps some quirk of temperature, the eaves must trap moisture. A definite mist was swirling softly against the top of the window all the while the sun shone brightly through the bottom. It was so interesting I went to the kitchen window to see if it was there, but it wasn't. It continued for several minutes before melting away, and nestled up here in my attic I felt almost as though I were inside a cloud.

This morning I cleaned and shopped. As I was carrying groceries up the steps, Sarah Cooley called me to come sit with her in the backyard. She introduced me to the other widow from the first floor, Mrs. Harmon. Once again Sarah offered her car for marketing, but I said I like the exercise.

It was unusually soft and warm for May, and quite pleasant sitting idly in the sun. A light breeze was sending tiny ripples across the fishpond, and although the fish are not yet back in it I

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became aware that some trick of light made it appear as though something were down there, a shadowy shape just below the surface. Neither of the ladies seemed to notice it, but I could not make myself look away. It became so obvious to me something was down there under the water that I became ill, having no choice but to excuse myself from pleasant company.

All day I was restless and apprehensive and finally went to bed early, but in the dark it came, my mind playing forbidden scenes. Over and over I heard the creaking pulleys and saw the placid surface of Jordan's pond splintered by the rising roof of Daddy's rusty old car. I heard tortured screams and saw her wild crazy eyes. I must not sit by the fishpond again.

May 19: I was strong again this morning. I lay and watched the little cloud. There is something strangely soothing about its silent drifting; I was almost sorry to see it go.

I ate well and tried to read the paper, but I kept being drawn to the kitchen window and its clear view of the fishpond. At last I gave up and went out for some fresh air. Sarah and Mrs. Harmon were preparing for a drive in the country as I went down my steps and Sarah invited me, but I declined.

Mr. Mazek was surprised to see me in the store on Sunday. They were quite busy and I offered to stay, but he said I should go and enjoy myself while I'm young. Gloria waggled her fingernails at me. I lingered a while, but finally just bought some shampoo and left.

A bus was sitting at the corner, and not even noticing where it was going I got on. Eventually it deposited me downtown and I spent the day wandering and watching people. I find the city has a vigorous pulse. Everyone seems to know exactly where he's going.

I must have left the shampoo somewhere. It doesn't matter. I already have plenty.

May 20: Today I arrived at the store early. Last week I noticed that the insides of the glass display cases were dirty, so I cleaned them. Mr. Mazek was delighted; he said Gloria never sees when things need cleaning.

Gloria suggested I should have my hair cut and styled, instead of letting it just hang straight; she told me where she has hers done. I'm sure she was trying to be friendly and I thanked her, but I have to laugh when I think of me wearing something like her dyed red frizz.

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Mr. Mazek talked to me today about joining some sort of group to meet new people. He suggested a church group as a promising place to start. A church group, of all things! Perhaps he thought I came into the store yesterday because I was lonely and had nothing better to do.

Tonight my landlady, Mrs. Wright, inquired if I had made proper arrangements for mail delivery. Since I've received none, she thought there might have been an error. Again I regretted having to lie. Only the white coats and she would be interested in my whereabouts, and I have worked too hard to evade them.

I am restless and somewhat tense this evening.

May 24: My second week and second paycheck in the bank, and it still goes well.

I've realized with some regret that Gloria and I are not going to be friends. I try, but I'm not fond of her. For one thing, she's lazy; I find myself finishing half of her duties. She makes numerous errors in transactions, and although I've pointed them out to her, she doesn't do any better. I'm undecided whether to bring this to Mr. Mazek's attention. Surely he must be aware of it.

On several occasions this week I've experienced a slight blurring of vision, as though a mist were before my eyes. I'm concerned about the cost involved, but prices and labels have to be read accurately, so it seems essential that I have my eyes tested.

May 26: What an odd thing! The little cloud has moved from under the eaves in my bedroom to the kitchen window. Yesterday when I awoke it wasn't there, and as I was having breakfast, suddenly there it was outside the window, soft and friendly, rolling gently against the pane. Perhaps it's my imagination, but it seems larger. It was there again today, a most welcome sight.

Yesterday was an enjoyable day—the usual cleaning and shopping.

Today was not so enjoyable. Just as I was finishing lunch, I heard voices under my steps where Sarah parks her car. The ladies were getting ready for another Sunday drive and when I looked out, they were concerned over an ominous sound in the engine. Before I stopped to think, I heard myself offering to look at it. All the way down the steps I told myself it would be all right, but as soon as I raised the hood, the blackness and nausea came. I couldn't see and somewhere far away I heard a voice calling, "Allie! Allie, where are you?"

Somehow I managed to find the trouble and get back upstairs.

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Everything was shadows, threatening. I couldn't catch my breath and my hands wouldn't stop shaking. Suddenly I was at the kitchen window, straining to see down into the fishpond. I'm afraid I don't know what happened next.

But the worst is over. I'm all right now. I have drawn the shade over the kitchen window so I will never see the fishpond again. It's going to be all right.

I wish it were tomorrow and time to be with Mr. Mazek again.

May 30: Gloria takes advantage of him. I have watched her carefully this week and she is useless in that store. Mr. Mazek is so warm and gentle he tends to overlook her inadequacy, but it is wrong of her. I see now she's also a shameless flirt, teasing almost every man who comes in. Today she and a pharmaceutical salesman were in the back stockroom for over an hour, laughing and smoking. I could see that Mr. Mazek didn't like it, but he did nothing to stop it. I've been there long enough to see that he and I could manage that store quite nicely. We really don't need Gloria.

I have an appointment for my eyes. The mist occurs frequently now.

June 2: The cloud *is* getting bigger. Yesterday morning the sun shone brightly in my bedroom, but the kitchen was dim and there was a shadow on the shade. When I raised it a fraction, there were silky fringes resting on the sill. I stepped out on the landing and saw it pressed securely over the pane. It is warm, not damp to the touch—warm, soft, and soothing. I have raised the kitchen shade again—the cloud blots out the fishpond completely.

Yesterday I started down the steps to do my marketing, my eyes lowered to avoid sight of the fishpond, and through the steps I saw the top of Sarah's car. Something stirred across it like currents of water, and suddenly I was so weak and dizzy I had to grip the railing to keep from falling as I crept back up the stairs.

I have stayed in all day.

June 7: I have been in since Wednesday with the flu. I began feeling badly Tuesday, but I worked until Wednesday noon when Mr. Mazek insisted I go home. I'm sorry to leave him with no one but Gloria, but I am certainly not well enough to work.

I came home to bed, but the sun shining through my window made disturbing movements in the room. Everything is so green, and the pulsing shadows across the ceiling made it seem that I was underwater. Suddenly I was trapped, suffocating, my lungs bursting for air.

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I've moved my bedding and fashioned a bed for myself on the living-room couch. Here I can see and draw comfort from the cloud. I will sleep now.

June 10: I have been very ill. Sarah has come to my door twice, but I was too tired and weak to call out, so she went away. I am feverish; sometimes I am not sure I'm awake or asleep and dreaming. I just realized today is special—the first month's anniversary of my new life. Somehow it seems longer. I'd hoped

June 11: I've just awakened and am watching the cloud. Little wisps are peeping playfully under my door. I think it wants to come inside.

June 12: I am better today. Mrs. Wright used her passkey to come in and was horrified to find I'd been so sick and no one knew. She and Sarah wanted to take me to a doctor, but I cannot get inside that car, so I convinced them I'm recovering. She brought hot soup and I managed to get some down.

The cloud pressed close behind her when she came in, but didn't enter. Perhaps it's waiting for an invitation. Poor Mrs. Wright was so concerned with me she didn't notice the cloud.

June 13: Today I felt well enough to go downstairs to Mrs. Wright's and call Mr. Mazek. I couldn't go until after noon—Sarah's car was down there. I became quite anxious, sure that he needed me in the store. He sounded glad to hear my voice and pleased that I am better, but insisted I not come in until Monday when I am stronger.

I am so ashamed. Suddenly wanting to be with him today, I heard myself pleading. Before I could stop, I told him my entire plan for letting Gloria go and having the store just to ourselves. He was silent so long that I came to my senses and realized my mistake, so I laughed and said something about the fever talking. After a moment he laughed too, and I said I would see him on Monday.

I have let the cloud come in. It sifts about me gently and seems to fill the room.

June 21: Didn't go to the bank today. Crowds and lines begin to annoy me. I will manage with the money and food I have on hand.

Mr. Mazek, bless him, is concerned about my health. I see him watching me with a grave expression, so I work harder to show him I am strong and fine.

I've started taking the cloud to work with me. It stays dis-

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creetly out of the way, piling gently in the dim corners, but it comforts me to know it's there, and I find myself smiling at it when no one's looking.

Yesterday afternoon I went to the back stockroom for something, and I'd forgotten Gloria and another one of her salesmen were in there. I stopped when I heard their voices, but not before I heard Gloria say my name and something about "stupid hick"; then they laughed together. Tears came to my eyes, but suddenly a mist was all around me and the cloud was there, smoothing, enfolding, shutting everything away.

A note from Mrs. Wright on my door tonight said that the eye doctor had called to remind me of my appointment. No need to keep it now.

June 23: Sarah's car was here all day yesterday, so I did not go out.

I don't even go into the bedroom now. I am still sleeping on the couch. Because it's old and lumpy, perhaps that's what's causing the dreams. Today I awoke suddenly, my heart pounding and my face wet with tears. I thought I was back there again and all the white coats stood leaning over me. "You can go home," they chorused in a nasty singsong. "You can go home at last to live with your mother." I lay there shaking, remembering. They really believed I would stay with *her!*

Marketed, but did not clean. I am so tired

June 27: You see? I function normally. I reason, so I am all right. It's that lumpy old couch. Last night the dream was about Daddy choking out his life at the bottom of Jordan's pond. I was out of control when I awoke, but the cloud came and took it all away. Today I fixed my blankets on the floor.

June 28: Dear Mr. Mazek continues to be solicitous of my health. Today he suggested I take a week off—get some rest or take a little vacation. He looked so troubled, but of course I couldn't leave him like that.

Sometimes I feel afraid, feel that everything is slipping away. I am trying so hard.

Maybe I should be more tolerant of Gloria.

July 5: After several hours inside my blessed cloud, I believe I am calm enough to think things through. I have been hurt and betrayed. I cannot conceive such betrayal!

Today I discovered that Gloria is—how shall I say it?—"carrying on" with Mr. Mazek and has evidently been doing so for

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years. Apparently they were supposed to spend the holiday yesterday together, but Gloria went off with someone else. I heard them through the closed door of Mr. Mazek's little office—their voices were very loud—and Gloria was laughing at him! The cloud came to me instantly and I don't remember the rest of the day.

Now I begin to understand. It explains so many things. At first I was terribly angry with Mr. Mazek. Now I realize Gloria tempted him and he was too weak to resist. The evil of that woman. Something must be done. This cannot be allowed to continue.

July 8: I found my opportunity today when we were working together in the stockroom. I began by telling her my finding out was an accident, but that now she must stop it at once. She just played with her fingernails, smiled, and said nothing until I reminded her he was a respected married man with grandchildren and she was ruining all their lives. Then she laughed out loud, said Mr. Mazek was a big boy, and why didn't I mind my own business.

July 11: I'm afraid it's hopeless. For three days I've pursued and pleaded with her to stop her heartless action. This afternoon she suddenly turned on me, screaming harsh cruel things I can't bring myself to repeat. I couldn't listen, so I took refuge in the cloud. Later I saw her speaking forcefully to Mr. Mazek; it looked almost as though she were threatening him. What shall I do now?

I am not sleeping well at all

July 12: I have been let out of my job. There is no less painful way to say it. This afternoon Mr. Mazek called me into his office and let me go as of today, but he will pay me for an extra week. I could say nothing, I was so stunned. He said something about his part-time student needing more money in the summer, but of course I know that's not the reason. He said he was sorry, and he looked so unhappy that I felt sorry for him. I know it isn't his fault. I know he would rather have me with him than Gloria. Even the cloud has not been able to save me today

July 16: I have not left here for four days. I know, because I have marked them on the wall the way I did when I was there. Tomorrow I will draw a crossbar over the four little straight sticks.

I think I have eaten. There are empty cans on the floor and bits of food in my blankets.

The cloud sustains me—whispering, shutting out the pain.

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July 19: It is all arranged. Gloria was alone when I went in this morning for my last paycheck. She seemed nervous and a bit ashamed. We were both polite and she went back to Mr. Mazek's office for my pay.

I felt a great sadness. I love that little store. And I have memorized it so well in the time I was allowed to be a part of it. It is fortunate that I know precisely where everything is kept.

At first she refused my invitation to have lunch with me today. She said she begins her vacation tomorrow. But I was persistent, pleading how vital it is to me that we part with no hard feelings between us. Finally she agreed, and I am calm inside the cloud, and strong and confident again.

She came here to my apartment and it went well. Lunch was pleasant and Mr. Mazek's name was never mentioned. I even told her all about myself, and she seemed no more upset than could be expected . . .

Tonight I put a note on Mrs. Wright's door saying I'd been called away for a few weeks. I've moved my heavy furniture in front of the door. I must be very still and remember not to turn on lights. There is enough light from the street to write by and the cloud is here to protect and keep me. I have come a long way. This time it is right.

July : All goes back, goes back. The white coats were wrong. I can't do it.

I saw Daddy again. We stood under the lantern in the big old barn. He showed me all the parts of his old car and how each one of them worked. It felt so safe and good to be with him, and he told me again that I was his good right hand. I wanted

Bad. Oh bad. Everyone said you were crazy. Mean. Your Bible and your praying and church, over and over, your church every night, shouting and praying, never doing anything to help Daddy and me on the farm. Sitting at the kitchen table with your Bible, singing and praying, everything dirty and undone, then into the old car and off to church to shout and pray some more while Daddy and I did all the work.

Never soothed him, never loved him, just prayed at him and counted his sins. Couldn't go to school, made me stay home and work on the farm, no books, books are the devil's tools, had to hide my books in the barn high up under the eaves. Ugly, you're a big ugly child, girl, and you prayed for my soul, prayed for mine and Daddy's souls. Poor sad Daddy's soul.

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Took it too hard they said, oh yes, took it too hard, so they sent me away for the white coats to fix and then they made me go back to you, your Bible, and your praying, and everyone said it was an accident, a tragic accident they said, but you knew, you never said but you knew, and you prayed and sang and quoted the Bible and you broke my Daddy's life. In the clouds, girl's always got her head in the clouds, I loved my Daddy and you prayed for souls and went to church every night and every night It is hot in here. It must be summer outside. All the windows are closed up tight and it is very hot here under the eaves. In the clouds

Today: I do not know what day it is. How many days I have been here. Markings on my walls, words and drawings I do not understand. I lie here on the floor and watch my cloud. It sighs and swirls and keeps me safe. I can't see outside it anymore. It is warm and soft and I will stay inside forever. No one can find me now.

Gloria is beginning to smell. Puffy Gloria and her long red claws. Silly foolish Gloria who didn't even complain when the coffee tasted strange. I have set my Daddy free.

I am in the barn. Night. I am supposed to be milking the cow. I am peaceful, serene. I have done it well and now life will be rich and good. The old car coughs and soon I hear it rattling toward the steep hill over Jordan's pond. It starts down. I listen. Content. The sound fades, a voice, the wrong voice, calling my name: "Allie! Allie, where are you?" The light goes out of the world.

Odaddydaddydaddy, where were you going in the car that night? Wasn't supposed to be you supposed to be her her her

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Judith Garner's first story, "Trick or Treat," appeared in the July 1975 issue of EQMM. It was a tale of horror, and in its own way her second story has a touch of—not horror exactly, but—well, see for yourself . . .

EVIDENCE OF INTENT

by JUDITH GARNER

I know she hates me.

I look at her across the fire in our living room and appreciate the changes that money has made in her life. Gone the wild "natural" look of the Bohemian gamine. Now her hair is coiffured by an expensive hairdresser, her nails are long and faultlessly polished, and, I am sorry to say, her waist is at least four inches thicker.

As indeed, my own is. Maybe a bit more. Perhaps that is why—but no, I was just tired last night.

How long is it since we made our "marriage of opposites"? All of five years. Time enough to be bored with the predictability of each other's conversation.

Who am I? Bernard Demarest, stockbroker, of Leatherhead, Surrey. Fat, balding, and 53. She is 20 years younger.

What would she do if I were gone? Travel, probably. Although she has made a big show of not going anywhere without me, she would flee Leatherhead like a bat out of hell for the capitals of Europe. Handsome young lovers—while she herself is young. She *is* still young, while I am old at 53.

And now the coffee tastes funny.

She made it.

"This tastes foul. What are you trying to do, poison me?"

I meant it as a joke, but it came out mean and irascible.

And she flushes, the very picture of guilt. So now I know. The honeymoon is over and she is trying to get rid of me.

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In that moment I said farewell to all her loveliness and all our plans for merging Wealth and Beauty. I rejected the cultural education she had given me, the Larry Rivers on the wall, and the antique Afghan rug beneath my feet.

I had better finish with her before she finishes me.

Who is our new neighbor? A policeman named Chamberlain. I could call him in. Get to know him in a friendly way and ask him to get the coffee analyzed.

But first I will need to take a sample.

Angrily I spit out what is in my mouth and go to the bathroom. There I take an empty shampoo bottle, rinse it, preserve about two ounces of the coffee, and lock the bottle in my briefcase.

Detective-Sergeant Chamberlain is hard to get to know. I make a few false starts, but he is always in a hurry to go somewhere.

I remember from last year that he is a great gardener. But can I wait until the gardening season begins?

Finally I track him down at a horticultural show.

There was something wrong with the butter at dinner. But who would put poison in butter? I notice she didn't eat any.

I keep a sample of it in an empty medicine box. When can I confront her with her crime?

But back to the horticultural show.

"Can I ask you—just in a general way—what a friend of mine can do if he suspects he's being poisoned?"

"I'd say he should report it to the police." Cold comfort here, but he adds, "Of course you can always try the Public Analyst." He gives me a shrewd look. I don't think I took him in for an instant.

"How can I get in touch with the Public Analyst—I mean, how can my friend get in touch with him?"

He gives me an address from a little printed diary in his pocket.

Last night there was something gritty in my cocktail. Ground glass? I have a sample of it in my briefcase in a miniature liqueur bottle. How can she think of ridding herself of so faithful a sweetheart as I once was? Does the springtime of love mean nothing to her?

Then I thought I would divorce her quietly, using the P.A.'s evidence as grounds.

I took all the evidence and bundled it up in a shoebox—the shampoo bottle, the liqueur bottle, and the medicine box.

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I said goodbye to her that morning, just as usual. She looked older, more harassed, and although she was dressed, her hair was still in the plait she slept in, and her face was not yet made up.

Instead of this carelessness making me feel distaste, I held her closely to my chest in a long trembling embrace.

"Darling!" she breathed in pleased surprise. "I thought you didn't love me any more. You've been so offhanded lately. Have you been overworking?"

"Yes. Probably," I agreed.

All morning long the memory of her wilting body tormented me. I did not know whether to go through with it or not.

I compromised. I gave a false name to the Public Analyst. What if they were bound to start a prosecution? "If there are grounds to believe a felony has been committed"—isn't that what they say?

I won't divorce her, I think, as I wait for the little gray man to bring back the report. I love her too much. If she's trying to poison me, I'll murder her in cold blood. You see, I still love her.

Then I would kill myself. I couldn't live without her.

They seem to be taking a long time in there. Surely she can't have chosen an *obscure* poison? That would be so unlike her.

My God, I'm even admiring the honest straightforward way in which she's trying to kill me.

If.

If she's been trying to kill me. There's always a hope, still, that she's innocent.

"Mr. Demarest?"

I snap to attention as though I were still in the army. "Yes?"

"This is a very strange inquiry—"

"Yes?" My heart is in my throat.

"You see, none of the products you brought us was contaminated. The coffee was all right, as was the saccharin; the roll was all right too, as was the low-calorie spread; and the tomato juice and vodka were all right, as was the methyl cellulose—"

"What is that?" I leap on it.

"It's an appetite suppressant chiefly, aside from its industrial uses. You never heard of it? Ha, ha! It looks as though someone was trying to slim you down."

Saccharin—funny-tasting.

Low-calorie spread—ugh.

Methyl cellulose—gritty.

I don't know what to say.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

In the world of books, it is elementary to deduce the beginning of the Christmas season. More titles are released in the few months preceding the holidays than in the rest of the year combined. This year is no exception, and the books are bigger, better, more expensive and more exciting than in any season in recent memory.

For longer than most of us have lived, there has been a "Christie for Christmas" and it is true again —for the last time. Two years ago saw the demise of Poirot in *Curtain*. Last year ended the adventures of Miss Marple in *Sleeping Murder* (Bantam, $2.25). Now, alas, the end of the Mistress of Mystery herself, with the publication of *An Autobiography* by Agatha Christie (Dodd, Mead, $15). A huge illustrated volume, it contains so much that it is impossible to know where to begin to tell about it. The bulk of the book concerns her early life, essentially finishing up with the World War II years. Dame Agatha then adds a smaller chapter, written in 1965, in which she admits to being both pleased and baffled that *The Mousetrap* is still performed after 13 years; today, 12 years later, it is, of course, still a staple of the London stage. She describes herself in an earlier chapter as a "go-ahead girl," risking the reputation of fastness by wearing a Peter Pan collar (and thus revealing four inches of feminine neck below the chin). The autobiography is so human and so charmingly written that it will rank with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Murder on the Orient Express,* plus a handful of others, as the best of Christie.

Another big book, with lots of illustrations, is Jack W. Tracy's *The Encyclopedia Sherlockiana* (Doubleday, $10). Not exactly fun to read, being somewhat dry and straightforward, it is an extraordinarily comprehensive work. It contains, for example, 23 instances in more than a score of stories in which Holmes uses his lens (magnifying glass), filling an entire column. If you are serious about the minutae of Sherlockian lore, this book must be on the

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shelf.

Not comprehensive, not essential, not authoritative, and not describable is *Murder Ink: The Mystery Lover's Companion* (Workman, $7.95 paper, $12.50 cloth) perpetrated by Dilys Winn. Another enormous book, it is a compendium of oddments, curiosities, and more entertaining vignettes about the mystery than has ever appeared in a single book (or in any trilogy, for that matter). It contains lists, puzzles, games, essays, illustrations, and contributions by more celebrated authors and fans of the mystery than could be counted on the fingers and toes of a regiment. Like *The People's Almanac* and *The Book of Lists,* you will dip into this eccentric potpourri for the next decade.

Novels are seldom reviewed in this column, that pleasant occupation ordinarily left in the capable hands of our distinguished colleague Jon L. Breen, but it is always a joy to share a genuine treat. Stanley Ellin's *The Luxembourg Run* (Random House, $8.95) is finally available, and you will rarely encounter a better-plotted, more suspenseful or stylishly written piece of fiction than this one. A word of warning: do not read the dust-wrapper blurb, which manages to give away virtually every twist and turn (except the last, which is a beauty!) in what ought to be a surprise-filled book.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Although not yet scheduled by ABC-TV, the telefeature based on *The Doorbell Rang* has been finished by Paramount, with Thayer David playing an imposing Nero Wolfe and Tom Mason as his Archie. It's the case in which Wolfe takes on the FBI, aiding a woman (Anne Baxter) who finds herself persecuted for writing a book exposing that organization—a theme more curiously relevant now than when Stout's indictment first appeared (1965). Written and directed by Frank Gilroy *(The Subject Was Roses),* the drama and its New York setting have been "contemporized," with the original ending—the doorbell ringing—somewhat changed and extended, but it is reported the Stout family on viewing the film thought Gilroy's adaptation and dialogue liberties properly "Stoutian." The proper Wolfean brownstone was found after a long search in New York's Brooklyn Heights section as the original buildings on West 35th Street have long vanished.

The incredible soundstage—the

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world's biggest–built by British Rank at Pinewood for *The Spy Who Loved Me* is now being used for *Superman,* but probably will house two upcoming Rank mystery projects: a remake of Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes,* with George Axelrod reworking the 1936 Ethel Lina White book for Roger Moore and Cybill Shepherd; and Michael Winner's jetting Chandler's *The Big Sleep* to a London setting (!) with Robert Mitchum and Julie Christie. Strangely, the *next* Bond film, *For Your Eyes Only,* will not be made at Pinewood nor in England (though not in the United States either, producer Cubby Broccoli has grumbled).

The current James Bond, Roger Moore (who has also had a stab at Sherlock Holmes), starred in one of television's most successful mystery-adventure series, *The Saint.* Actually, Leslie Charteris' Simon Templar has been a success in many media: books, radio (Edgar Barrier, Tom Conway, Brian Aherne, Barry Sullivan, Vincent Price), the movies (Louis Hayward, George Sanders, Hugh Sinclair). This spring Moore will pass the halo of the "debonair, preposterously handsome" hero to a new Templar, young Ian Ogilvy, remembered as the dashing poet husband of Elizabeth Bellamy in *Upstairs, Downstairs.* At first Ian was to portray the *son* of the original Simon in *The Return of the Saint* (with Moore making fatherly appearances), but this family plot was dropped. The hour series s now being filmed on the French Riviera, the lush enticements of the location providing the new Templar with suitable adventures and the opportunity to let his halo slip a little.

Pressure groups campaigning against "violence" on television are achieving great success, and the backlash unfortunately may affect the mystery genre in the medium for years to come. Currently suggested is that the networks voluntarily unify under these guidelines: a ban on back-to-back crime-show programing, limiting single crime-program series to an hour-and-a-half maximum length, and reducing the number of such shows on any network to three or four per week starting with the 1978 Fall season. (Understand, even bloodless whodunits fall into the "crime" category.) These are *minimal* demands recently proposed to the National Association of Broadcasters. Being activist about excessive TV violence is laudable, but it is another matter to force producers to abandon the mystery entirely, a very real possibility if current network projections come true. Be warned.

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"Q"

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INTERVIEW: ELLESTON TREVOR (ADAM HALL)

In recent years, readers have enjoyed a rare situation: several first-rate espionage novelists have produced fine books and memorable characters. No agent is better known than Quiller, whose exploits have appeared in a series of novels by Adam Hall, the pseudonym of Elleston Trevor. Under his own name, Trevor writes excellent suspense thrillers, including *The Flight of the Phoenix* and the recently heralded *The Theta Syndrome*.

EQMM: Since *The Quiller Memorandum* won an Edgar as the best novel of 1965, there has been a new Quiller novel approximately every other year. Is another in the works?

TREVOR: The eighth in the series is just completed. *The Sinkiang Executive* has been the most difficult to write in terms of research. In it, Quiller has to fly a Russian plane, the Foxbat, over Russian territory as a Russian pilot. In order to get the mechanics of flying the plane accurate, I had to spend a good deal of time at an Air Force base in Arizona while three pilots briefed me. In the book, it is Quiller, of course, who gets the briefing. Ninety percent of the information remains unused, but it all goes into some very thick files in my home. You never know when it may be useful.

EQMM: How has Quiller changed since the first book?

TREVOR: He is more professional now than he once was. I reread an old Quiller and found him drinking wine. He would never do that today. He drinks carrot juice now—to improve his night vision.

EQMM: Are there other changes?

TREVOR: His attitude towards women has changed. Moira, his redhead, has become associated in his mind with death, for a strange reason. Before going off on a dangerous mission, he leaves her 500 roses in his will. He has no one else, no family, to leave anything to. When he is really in trouble, when he has overcooked something, he thinks of the roses, and of her.

EQMM: Are these changes deliberate?

TREVOR: They are evolutionary. The character is like a lump of clay or pottery. You shape and mold it (or him) as you go.

EQMM: Many authors finally tire of their heroes. Will you continue to write about Quiller?

TREVOR: Yes, I'm sure I will. I think of myself as a peacable man, and the Quiller books help to get out the latent aggressions.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

The last few years have seen a modest but heartening resurgence in the publication of single-author volumes of mystery short stories. 1977 has already produced new collections from Julian Symons, Joan Aiken, Robert Bloch, and Barry Perowne. This month three more can be added.

***** Melville Davisson Post: *The Complete Uncle Abner,* with introduction and bibliography by Allen J. Hubin, illustrations by Darrel Millsap, The Mystery Library, University of California, San Diego, Extension, Drawer P, Del Mar, CA 92014, $5.95 subscription; $6.95 non-subscription. The fourth volume in the ambitious Mystery Library project is the most significant to date, gathering all the Uncle Abner stories into one volume for the first time. The first 18 appeared first in book form in the 1918 collection, *Uncle Abner,* long regarded as one of the most important American collections of detective short stories, while the other four were first collected in Aspen Press's 1974 limited edition, *The Methods of Uncle Abner.* Hubin provides a fine introduction and an extensively annotated bibliography of all Post's books. Also appended are a chronology by Charles A. Norton of Post's life, an article by Post on the short mystery story, and brief essays about Post by Anthony Boucher and Grant Overton. Historical importance aside, do the tales of antebellum Virginia hold up as entertainment? Emphatically, yes.

*** Rex Stout: *Justice Ends at Home and Other Stories,* edited by John McAleer, Viking, $8.95. Stout's little-known magazine stories of the 1914–1918 period rate higher on historical interest than on pure quality, though there are ample indications of the writer he was to become in the humor, humanity, and discreet advances toward subjects then taboo. As in the Nero Wolfe stories, the characters and the styles are more notable than the plots. Though most are more or less crime stories, few are detective stories, among them the title novelette, pure detection with a surprising and well-clued finale. McAleer's informative 20-page introduction whets the appetite for his major Stout biography, still forthcoming.

** Joseph Payne Brennan: *The Chronicles of Lucius Leffing,* illustrated by John Linton, Donald M. Grant, West Kingston, Rhode Island, $7.00. Though they are minor works compared to some of the author's non-series horror stories, the cases of semi-psychic sleuth Leffing, a Victorian born too late, have their charms. Of the eight cases, five have had previous magazine publications. Of the

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new stories, "The Possible Suspects" (exercising fair play, rare for Leffing) and the vignette "Mem'ries" stand out. The illustrations are a decided plus.

*** Reginald Hill: *Ruling Passion,* Harper and Row, $8.95. The curiously delayed American debut of a major British writer of crime novels. The relationships of the main characters, notably fat, crude, ultimately likeable Superintendent Dalziel and his young associate Sgt. Pascoe, are more diverting than the staggeringly complicated plot.

*** Phyllis A. Whitney: *The Stone Bull,* Doubleday, $7.95. A romantic whodunit set at a Catskill resort hotel by a veteran of the best-seller list and a thorough professional. The background, atmosphere, and cast of suspects are all beautifully done, the plot well worked out though scorning detection.

*** Sandra Scoppettone: *Some Person Unknown,* Putnam, $8.95. Interesting fictionalized reconstruction of the Starr Faithfull murder case, a 1931 *cause célèbre.* The novel covers 1906 to 1931 with a nice sense of changing mores.

*** Lawrence Sanders: *The Second Deadly Sin,* Putnam, $9.95. Edward X. Delaney, former New York Chief of Detectives, comes out of retirement to investigate the murder of a universally hated artist. A strong story, well plotted and peopled, but twice as long as it needs to be, padded with overelaborate descriptions and cops' war stories.

*** Elleston Trevor: *The Theta Syndrome,* Doubleday, $7.95. A versatile veteran, equally well known as Adam Hall, presents a hospital suspense story with a touch of the paranormal. Fast-moving and totally gripping.

** Robert Jagoda: *A Friend in Deed,* Norton, $7.95. An advertising executive plots his wife's murder via a complex booby trap of the God-in-his-lap type with the couple's poodle as accomplice. Amusing first half, great plot twist midway, unfortunate loss of impetus to the finish, hard-to-swallow solution. Warning: the jacket blurb tells far too much.

** Max Collins: *The Slasher,* Berkley, $1.50. How about a cross between a hitman and a snowbound house party novel with a porno movie crew as boundees and series assassin Quarry as bodyguard-detective? Collins, a fast-reading, entertaining, pun-loving pro, does a more readable and intelligent "bloodbath" novel than most, and he seems a good bet for future glory.

** Mary Sellers: *Night Shadows,* Berkley, $1.75. An enjoyable blending of romantic suspense and the Bigfoot legend, though the ending could be stronger.

** Joseph DiMona: *The Benedict Arnold Connection,* Morrow, $8.95. This doomsday thriller about stolen nuclear devices offers short chapters, much paper-squandering white space, and the spare style of a movie treatment. Silly and incredible but still fun.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

THE VIENNA ELEPHANT, by Edwin Leather. Dodd, Mead, $7.95.

This absorbing novel of international intrigue—written by the recent Governor General of Bermuda—opens in the first grim days at the close of World War II, but swiftly turns to the present, to the adventures of the urbane, audacious Welshman, Rupert Conway. The discovery of the fabulous Fabergé pink elephant leads Conway, a distinguished Viennese art dealer, from the cosmopolitan Austrian capital to the dangerous territory behind the Iron Curtain. He probes the tangled, tortuous network of European art and diplomatic circles in an attempt to recover art treasures lost during the Nazi holocaust.

"An absorbing account of skullduggery."—*Publishers Weekly*

DEATH THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, by Richard Forrest. Bobbs-Merrill, $7.95.

This is the third in the successful suspense series featuring Lyon Wentworth, a writer of juveniles, and his wife Bea, who was formerly a Connecticut state senator and is now Connecticut's Secretary of State. On the morning of his birthday, Lyon is sailing his hot-air balloon, Wobbly II, over Long Island Sound when he sees a small plane go down in the Sound. Lyon is shaken because he recognizes the plane as belonging to Tom Giles, his best friend. Within minutes, there is no sight of the wreckage, and even after prolonged diving it can't be located. Later that night, Lyon gets a phone call from—Tom Giles. This is a fine suspense story of murder done with mirrors.

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNTED PRICE
Christie, Agatha	AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY	Dodd, Mead	$15.00	$12.00
Cunningham, E. V.	THE CASE OF THE ONE-PENNY ORANGE	Holt, Rinehart & Winston	6.95	5.50
Di Mona, Joseph	THE BENEDICT ARNOLD CONNECTION	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Ellin, Stanley	THE LUXEMBOURG RUN	Random House	8.95	6.95
Forrest, Richard	DEATH THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS	Bobbs-Merrill	7.95	6.35
Gerson, Noel	THE SMUGGLERS	T. Y. Crowell	8.95	6.95
Gill, Bartholomew	MC GARR AND THE SCIENCE CONSPIRACY	Scribners	7.95	6.35
Hill, Reginald	RULING PASSION	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Jagoda, Robert	A FRIEND IN DEED	Norton	7.95	6.35
Kaye, Marvin	MY SON, THE DRUGGIST	Doubleday	6.95	5.50
Leather, Edwin	THE VIENNA ELEPHANT	Dodd, Mead	7.95	6.35
MacDougall, James K.	WEASEL HUNT	Bobbs-Merrill	8.95	6.95
Edited by Maling, Arthur	WHEN LAST SEEN: Mystery Writers of America Anthology 1977	Harper & Row	10.00	8.00
Edited by McAleer, John	REX STOUT: JUSTICE ENDS AT HOME AND OTHER STORIES	Viking	8.95	6.95
Sanders, Lawrence	THE SECOND DEADLY SIN	Putnam	9.95	7.95
Scoppettone, Sandra	SOME PERSONS UNKNOWN	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Shannon, Dell	APPEARANCES AT DEATH	Morrow	7.95	6.35
Solomon, Brad	THE GONE MAN	Random House	7.95	6.35
Tracy, Jack W.	THE ENCYCLOPEDIA SHERLOCKIANA	Doubleday	10.00	8.00
Trevor, Elleston	THE THETA SYNDROME	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Whitney, Alec	DEATH IN DARKNESS	Doubleday Crime Club	6.95	5.50
Whitney, Phyllis A.	THE STONE BULL	Doubleday	7.95	6.35

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When this short-short appeared in the "London Evening News," it was titled: "Murder Was Getting To Be a Habit with Agatha" . . .

EARLY WARNING

by JOHN GLOAG

We took our time ordering lunch. Agatha has a way of changing her mind on and off for at least twenty minutes before choosing; meanwhile we drank three Manhattan cocktails. When we finally decided and Agatha had started on her fourth cocktail, I said, "And now, my dear, I'd like you to tell me just how you murdered Jimmy."

Agatha, who always described herself as a "masked" blonde, was fair-haired with a pale skin, light brown eyes, and a permanent expression of innocent surprise. Many men found her irresistible; most women loathed her. After a long pause, she said, "Why do you think I killed him?"

"This is your third husband to die as a result of an unfortunate accident."

"Writing murder stories has warped your mind," she said. "After all, there is such a thing as coincidence. Perhaps I'm just unlucky. I was fond of Jimmy, but—" She left the sentence hanging. I finished it by saying, "But you grew tired of him."

"Well, no, not exactly," she said. "He became a habit, and it's a bad thing in married life, or in any sort of life, for a partner to become a habit. Also he was becoming a bore, and—if you don't already know this you soon will—on that cruise I fell in love with somebody else."

A waiter was hovering. "Let the story ride for the moment," she suggested. "I'll tell it to you after lunch." And she did, over coffee and brandy at our quiet table in an alcove.

"Jimmy had some quite maddening habits," she said. "Like whistling between his teeth, always the same damn tune. I could have worn that, but the poor dear who was so amusing and witty when we were first married was becoming a bore, and he knew it.

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The only way he could ever be what he thought was his old sparkling self was to get tight. He suffered from illusions and really believed that when he was full of booze he was brilliant. I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

I did; she had clearly acquired some of the late Jimmy's alcoholic habits—a case, perhaps, of protective mimicry. Also she had known me for years and in the past had parked many troubles on me with an odd trustfulness.

Jimmy's fatal accident had occurred at sea, on the *Frivolidad,* a luxurious motor yacht that belonged to one of Jimmy's wealthy friends, during a cruise in the Caribbean. A small party of their friends was also aboard. Apparently one of the odd things about Jimmy was that when he was tight he could perform acrobatic antics that he would never have attempted when sober.

"He had no head for heights," she told me. "He was absurd on tall buildings—he'd just cling to you like a frightened kid, though he was all right on a plane. He was rather ashamed of this, and liquor did something to him, so he'd take all sorts of silly risks and climb up high places and do silly tricks. I knew he'd behave like that on board the *Frovolidad* when he got tanked up, and of course he did. One of his favorite stunts was to climb up on the—what d'you call it?—bulwark—the rail thing at the side of the deck that prevents you from falling into the sea. Well, he'd stand on that, walk along it, and do balancing tricks."

"So it was an accident," I said. "Is that your story?"

"Of course it was an accident," she insisted. "He fell into the sea one evening and he was no good at swimming. The yacht was going pretty fast, and there was nothing we could do. We tried, of course—went round in circles for hours, it seemed."

"And that's your story."

"That's what happened."

"How did you make it happen? I won't give you away," I added. "I have a purely detached scientific interest in the method."

She laughed. "Nobody would believe you if you repeated all this," she said. "There's no evidence. It's only your word against mine. As a writer of fiction you're a licensed liar, and I've always suspected that you're rather in love with me. So nobody would believe anything you said."

I agreed with her. Nobody would. But she was wrong—I was not, and never have been in love with her. Only interested.

"From a murderer's point of view, nothing can be more satisfac-

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tory than a murder at sea," I said. "You've nothing to worry about."

"Not a thing in the world," she replied. "So I don't mind telling you." She treated me to one of her looks of surprised, dewy innocence. "Jimmy was insanely jealous," she continued. "One night, quite late, only three of us were on deck—Jimmy, Bill, and me."

"And you had fallen in love with Bill," I said.

"Yes. Jimmy didn't know it, but Bill did. We, Bill and I, were sitting under a rather bright light—I'd chosen the place. Nobody else was on deck. Jimmy was as high as a kite and particularly silly. So, as usual, he started showing off. The sea was smooth, and of course he had to hop up on the rail and begin to do what he though was a tap dance on it.

"I must say he balanced extraordinarily well—his performance was almost professional. Then I did what I'd planned to do. As Jimmy turned to come back towards us with his balancing act still going strong, I kissed Bill in the sort of way people kiss when they mean a lot more. I knew Jimmy would sober up when he saw *that*, and he'd lose his balance. The only risk was that he'd fall on the deck. Fortunately he didn't."

There was a long pause.

"What are you doing about Bill?" I asked.

"I shall marry him," she replied.

"But he's married already," I protested.

She smiled and said, "That's a detail. *I* want to marry him."

Naturally I've not used the right names, but I've written this rather sordid little story because Bill is one of my oldest friends. He should have early warning.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by
THOMAS WALSH

The two lovers had one obstacle to their future happiness—one person who stood in their way. With that person eliminated the lovers would have freedom, money, everything their hearts desired. To accomplish their purpose they needed a patsy, a tool, a fall guy . . . Thomas Walsh at his best . . .

THE SACRIFICIAL GOAT

by *THOMAS WALSH*

They met one bright August afternoon in one of the elegant red and gold Hotel Versailles elevators, and since it was a bit crowded at the moment they had to stand close together, though without touching. Yet even on that first occasion, in the way that such people instinctively recognize each other's morality and inclinations, there was something communicated between them. They touched eyes for only a brief instant, yet even so the man knew the woman from then on, and the woman the man.

They were very careful, however. Mistakes were always possible. So it was mid-October before the man rented a small furnished apartment on East 78th Street under the name of Robinson, after which the woman came over there to spend a few hours in the afternoon with him about twice a week. They were both experienced in such matters, the man very experienced, and after he had made sure there was an automatic elevator in the building and no doorman, everything could be managed with the most admirable discretion.

Nobody knew about them. Nobody suspected about them. But something unforeseen happened. Little by little the thing got more serious, or perhaps only more passionate, and by January it had become very serious. That was when they began to think with increasing hatred of the one person who stood in their way. Without that one person they would have more money than they could use. Without him they could have everything they wanted

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and enjoy a long happy life together.

At first, however, they only considered the thing silently, in their thoughts. But one afternoon the man remarked as if jokingly how fortunate it would be if only some sort of accident occurred, and the woman responded in the same manner. But an accident, the man pointed out, might be very dangerous for them. Details could go wrong; mistakes could be made; everyone concerned, husband or wife, son or daughter, would be thoroughly checked out, even down to the hotel staff—unless, of course, someone else could be found who obviously had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to eliminate that one person.

After that, no longer jokingly, they began to discuss who the someone might be. First, there must be no question as to his identity. And second, the police must be made to realize at once who had done the thing and the reason for it. If that part could be set up, only one very simple question remained. Who would the tool of murder be? Whom would they pick as the sacrificial goat?

Finally the solution presented itself and they both immediately understood it was the perfect solution. Soon a pleasantly conspiratorial excitement carried them ahead faster and faster, and by the last week in January, with every possible difficulty taken care of, they arranged the whole thing from beginning to end.

The Versailles was an old but still extremely elegant New York hotel. It had been designed by a famous architect many years ago, and though by now its quiet but luxurious high-society tone had perhaps faded a little, it still was considered by all the right people as far superior to the newer and more commercial establishments. It had a famous Garden Room, several expensive restaurants much too costly for the common herd, and half a dozen exclusive shops—jewelry, interior decorating, gentlemen's furnishings, and three French couturiers all just off the main lobby.

It was no longer, however, as in its first haughty years, restricted as to all minorities, and although its employees were screened much more carefully than the patrons upstairs, a few blacks and Puerto Ricans were beginning to be accepted. It had twenty-odd floors, and on the north side a magnificent view over Central Park. Every floor had a desk clerk and a page boy, and the page boy on the 17th floor was named Ramon Rodriquez.

One day he was on duty from seven in the morning until twelve noon, and again from six until nine in the evening. On the follow-

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ing day, conversely, he worked from twelve noon until six. He was a slim undersized boy with black hair and cheerfully glistening black eyes, only 15 years old—but the Versailles, needing a page boy, had not bothered to make sure that he was old enough to work full time according to the laws of New York State. Interviewed only by the bell captain, he was paid no more than the minimum wage—one reason perhaps that the Versailles needed a page boy—and out of that, the bell captain said, the Versailles would deduct $5 a month to keep his uniform cleaned and pressed. But in addition, it was also explained to Ramon, there would be a great many tips from all the rich society people who patronized the Versailles, and those tips would be entirely Ramon's.

So Ramon expected great things for himself on his first job, although he soon discovered that the tips were more a promise than an actuality. Most of the better suites on the 17th floor were reserved for permanent guests, and all had maids who answered the door. It happened, consequently, that when Ramon delivered a package to one of the suites, or ran an errand for the occupant, the only thanks he got, if that, was a nod from the maid.

There were no more than a few generous exceptions. A rich mining man named Mr. Lahrheim in 1734 gave Ramon a dollar for anything he did, and a Mrs. McLeod in 1748 gave him a crisp five-dollar bill every Saturday morning, although she required less service from him than anyone on the whole floor. But most of the other permanent guests, in sharp distinction, must have thought that what Ramon did for them was well covered by the exorbitant rent they paid the Versailles, and that there was no need of further largess.

And Ramon did a great many things for them which most never even thought about. On early mornings, for instance, he delivered newspapers to their doors, which they could read while having breakfast comfortably in bed; and on Sunday mornings, when the papers were five or six times the daily size, he had to go downstairs on the service elevator three or four times, pile the papers onto a cart, then wheel the cart from Suite 1701 at the northwest corner of the Versailles to Suite 1794 at the southwest corner. He ran all their errands, brought all their packages, since no outside delivery boy was ever admitted into the Versailles corridors, and 20 or 30 times a day, when a guest was out, he took a telephone message from Miss Riley, the floor clerk, and then hung

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it on the proper doorknob for the guest's return.

In between times he had to sit on a small straight-backed chair by Miss Riley's desk, and when a guest appeared, was required to jump up, ring for the elevator, and then stand as rigidly at attention as a West Point cadet until the guest had been wafted down. On Christmas morning, when he also had to work, he did that for old Mrs. Terwilliger in 1707.

"Oh, yes," old Mrs. Terwilliger beamed, toddling into the floor clerk's office with a nurse supporting her on one side and a uniformed chauffeur on the other—on her way, probably, at that time of the morning, to one of the more exclusive Park Avenue churches.

"Christmas Day. We mustn't forget the boy, must we? Now let me see."

And Ramon had great expectations at that moment. For month after month he had done chore after chore for Mrs. Terwilliger, but never yet had he been given so much as a five-cent piece for any of them. His expectations proved much too optimistic, however. Mrs. Terwilliger rummaged through her purse, then rummaged again.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed. "It appears that I—would you have change for a dollar, Miss Riley?"

And Miss Riley, who liked Ramon very much, made a great show of examining her desk drawer.

"No," she said. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Terwilliger. But no, I haven't."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Terwilliger repeated, hesitating with anxious distress for a moment, then reluctantly extending the dollar bill. "Then I suppose—well, Christmas Day, after all. Here you are, boy."

Then the elevator went down and Miss Riley violently slammed in her desk drawer.

"Mean, miserable old bitch," she said. "Change for a dollar! It's a wonder she didn't want change for a dime, Ramon."

But still Ramon liked his job very much. The long and quiet Versailles halls, finished with subdued elegance in gold and green, were a great change for him from Spanish Harlem, and on his early morning shifts there were always wheeled breakfast trays outside many of the guest suites. Then Arturo the waiter would allow him to help himself to a leftover sausage or some buttered toast, and whatever remained in the silver coffee pots. In

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that way Ramon could have a fine breakfast for himself, leaving a little more at home for his four smaller brothers and sisters, although he had to be careful that none of the guests came along and caught him. They would probably have been very indignant at such low-class vulgarity in the Versailles and in all likelihood have reported it at the main desk on their way out.

Ramon even liked his gray and blue Versailles uniform. He always kept it immaculately neat—and of course his shoes polished, his hair brushed, and his fingernails cleaned, as the bell captain had impressed on him. But then Ramon had a certain ambition. He hoped, by hard and painstaking attention to duty, to become in time a bellhop down in the main lobby where he had heard that the tips amounted to more than $100 a week. And that sum would make a vast difference at home where Ramon was the only breadwinner. Therefore he was always quickly and cheerfully responsive to a guest's need, tip or no tip, and off like a flash to get them toothpaste or cigars from the drug store downstairs, or *Fortune* magazine or a Paris newspaper from the hotel newsstand.

There was an electric signboard on the wall over Miss Riley's desk, and on that, when a guest pressed the bell in his room, the corresponding number would appear—1714, 1729, 1765. Then Ramon, after pushing up the release disk so that the number dropped back into place, would be up and away on the instant. And every night at home, when he had to crowd into a rickety daybed with his two little brothers, he would first pray fervently for the bellhop's job, so that in his first months at the Versailles there was never any kind of mark against him.

Only a bare year out of San Juan, Ramon was a very good boy, and a very innocent boy, with almost no experience in the world. The man and the woman had chosen him out of sure instinct. Ramon had no money, no influential friends, and no way to get himself even half-competent legal help. And early in February it developed that if Arturo and Miss Riley liked him, there were other members of the Versailles staff who did not like him at all.

That proved itself one night when two security men appeared in the hall and beckoned him out silently from Miss Riley's desk. Each of them took him by an arm, gripping him painfully, and the blond, very good-looking one even twisted his arm painfully. They marched him down to the service stairway and there, with the hall door closed behind them, the blond security man immediately slapped him across the mouth.

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"Know what we got here?" he remarked to the other one. "A real smart little operator, Walter. Okay. I guess what we have to do now is to show him pretty damned quick just how smart he is to try and pull something like this."

"Guess we will," Walter said, and smashed Ramon's head into the wall. "Now tell me something, you little punk. You deliver a package to 1727 about six thirty tonight?"

Ramon was frightened and in much pain. He backed against the wall, shaking his head. It was not to deny that he had delivered the package to Mr. Curtis in Suite 1727. It was to show that in his pain and confusion he did not quite understand what they were asking him.

"No?" Walter said, smacking him again. "You mean you didn't? You mean the maid never left you all alone in the living room when she went inside to get the receipt signed, and that you weren't standing right beside old man Curtis' coin case when she came out with it? You better own up, punk, or me and Harry are going to knock the hell out of you. Where did you hide that coin you stole? What did you do with it? Take a look in his pockets, Harry."

But in Ramon's pockets there were only the few tips he had made, a subway token, and his locker key. That Harry handed to Walter.

"Probably stashed it away down there," he said. "Check it out, Walter. I'd bet on the thing."

Then, all alone, Harry twisted Ramon's arm even more viciously and kept on slapping his face. He also said things, but Ramon—15 years old, after all—was in no condition to understand what they were. He did not want to cry, but he had to. He crouched lower against the wall, shielding his face.

Walter came back.

"Nope," he said. "Nothing at all. Only his overcoat ain't there. Nothing but a crummy old sweater."

"Ees all I have to wear," Ramon whispered to them. "Ees all I have."

"That right?" Harry said. Crisply curling, reddish-gold hair; coldly sharp blue eyes with thick lashes; hard, hatingly contemptuous grin. "Then maybe they'll give you one up the river, because that's where you're going straight from here, cutie. You got just one chance before we take you around to the precinct house. What did you do with that coin you took? Where did you hide it?"

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"No coin," Ramon whispered. "No, no. I bring the package, yes. I wait for the maid to come back. But—"

They led him out into the hall and down to Suite 1727, where Mr. Curtis and Mr. and Mrs. Purnell, his daughter and son-in-law from 1739, were talking together in front of the door.

"Well, here's your answer," Harry said, brutally slapping Ramon's head forward. "He's the one stole it, Mr. Curtis, sir. We checked it all out for you, Walter and me, and the maid said he's the only one she left into your suite tonight. So it's got to be him. It's the only answer. No one else could have taken it."

Mr. Curtis glanced in helplessly at a glass-topped case, just like a museum case, that stood against one wall of the foyer. Each coin in there was nestled in a circle of red velvet that fitted exactly around it. One circle was empty. Mr. Curtis was a coin collector.

"Well, I know it was there," he said. "And now it isn't. And I paid over $15,000 for it in London last year. I'm sure you're right, men. But why you employ boys of this type—"

Mrs. Curtis came out of Suite 1727. She was a slim platinum-blonde, much younger than her husband, and had the aloof, haughtily disinterested expression of the fashion model she had been before Mr. Curtis married her. There was a coin in her right hand.

"Is this what you're so concerned about?" she asked calmly. "Really, Charles. I said that you only mislaid it somewhere. I found it under some letters on your desk inside. And you yourself put it down there last night after showing it to Ted Bannister and his wife. I saw you do it."

Mr. Curtis' mouth gaped.

"But I put it back in the case," he cried. "I did, Adele. I remember coming out into the living room after the Bannisters left and—"

"Oh, Daddy," Mrs. Purnell said, making an impatient gesture. "You remember so many things lately that you don't do at all. You forgot your dinner appointment with us only last Saturday. And you forgot about that Charity Ball at the Waldorf. I don't know what's getting into you."

"But I only made a mistake in the dates," he insisted feebly. "That's all, Barbara. I just—"

There was a pause. Mrs. Curtis and Mrs. Purnell murmured together. Mr. Purnell shook his head sadly. Harry and Walter

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glanced slyly at each other, grinning. But nobody looked at Ramon or appeared to notice the tears on his face. It was just as if Ramon were not present.

"Well, I guess it's all right," Mr. Curtis said finally to Harry and Walter. "I'm so sorry, so sorry, men. But I could have sworn—"

After that, rubbing the back of his gray head wearily, he went into 1727, with the other members of his family following him. The door closed, and after it had, Harry uttered a curt, jeering laugh.

" 'I'm so sorry,' " he mimicked. " 'So sorry, men.' But not a damn dime for us, Walter, not even after I told him all the trouble we went to. Only the best people here, hah? But all I hope is that they come up here some night and clean out the whole damn suite on him."

And Ramon was left all alone in the hall, with not one word of regret or apology having been spoken to him. It was at least five minutes before he could go back to the office again and face Miss Riley. His head hurt. His eyes felt hot and dry. But worst of all he felt deeply ashamed. It was as if no one had realized that Ramon was a human being. It was as if he had been, not only to Harry and Walter, just nothing at all.

About a week after that, a few minutes before nine in the evening and just as Ramon was preparing to go off duty, they found Curtis' body sprawled in front of the coin case in Suite 1727. It was Harry, making one of his regular house rounds, who saw the door to 1727 half open and discovered Mr. Curtis with blood all over his white evening shirt, and the one coin again missing from its place in the glass-topped museum case.

After that many things happened. Policemen came up by way of the service elevator, first two in uniform, then several more in ordinary civilian clothes. There was a great deal of feverish but subdued excitement in the 17th floor corridor, and even Mr. Lenormand the manager appeared, wringing his hands and whispering in agitated low tones to Walter and Harry by the side of Miss Riley's desk. But soon Mr. Lenormand, very distinguished-looking in a tail coat and white tie, nodded as if distractedly at Harry, and Ramon was again marched down to Suite 1727 where he had to close his eyes and swallow three times at the way Mr. Curtis looked.

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By that time there were a great many other men in the suite. Some measured things; some took pictures; and some spoke to the maid, then to Mrs. Curtis, who looked very pale and shaky, though without tears. But Mrs. Purnell sobbed quietly in one corner, while Mr. Purnell stared out of the window at Central Park.

It was all very frightening to Ramon, the way all the policemen kept whispering to Harry and then looking around at him, and it was only a little better when a tall slim man with hard eyes and a saturnine face had Ramon sit down on the couch with him—the only time Ramon had ever been permitted to sit in Suite 1727.

But the man had a calm quiet voice, almost a friendly voice, and could speak Spanish to Ramon. At first he asked very simple questions—how old Ramon was, whether he went to church, and how long he had been working at the Versailles. But Ramon hardly knew what he answered, having to close his eyes when they lifted Mr. Curtis' body onto a stretcher, covered it with a gray blanket, and carried it off in the direction of the service elevator so that none of the other guests would see it. Then only the slim man was left, and Harry and Mr. Lenormand, until another man came in from the hall holding something that was wrapped carefully in a white cloth.

Then all the men turned around to look at Ramon again, and the tall slim one, who had been called Lieutenant Da Costa by the others, walked across the room holding the white cloth in his hand.

He put his other hand under Ramon's chin and made him look straight into his eyes. Then he opened the cloth very suddenly, without even the least warning, and Ramon saw all the blood that had been wiped off on it, and under the blood a razor-sharp knife with a wood handle. It was done so suddenly that Ramon started to shake all over, and then he closed his eyes from the knife. But Da Costa forced his head back and turned over the knife.

"R.R.," he said, pointing a forefinger at two initials on the handle. "You see that, Ramon? And you just told me what your name is—Ramon Rodriquez. How about those initials, then? Is this your knife? Did you ever see it before?"

"I do not know it," Ramon whispered. "I swear, senor. I never see it before."

Harry came over to them.

"What the hell are you wasting time for?" he demanded angrily.

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"Just slap it out of him, Lieutenant. What else do you want? Mr. Curtis mislaid that same coin last week and this little jerk heard how much it was worth—about $15,000. We heard Mr. Curtis say that himself, all of us. So this little punk snuck in here to grab it tonight and Mr. Curtis caught him. And all of these people are the same kind, aren't they? Ain't one of them that doesn't have a knife handy, just in case."

"One of these people myself," Da Costa murmured, still looking down at Ramon. "But I never owned or used a knife in my life. And you know what, Hannegan? A lot of us don't."

"Well, of course," Hannegan said, coloring a bit. "Didn't mean anything like that, Lieutenant. Only trying to say—"

"Yes, I know," Da Costa put in. "How about the coin, O'Brien? Anybody find it yet?"

"Not yet," O'Brien said. "But it's around somewhere, Lieutenant. Got to be. Miss Riley says the kid ain't been off the floor since about 8:15. The last call he answered was at eight o'clock when somebody wanted him in 1735. Right down the hall."

"How long did the call take him?"

"Not long at all, Miss Riley says. He was always quick as a shot, according to her. She's sure he was back again in about two minutes. All he had to do for 1735 was take some letters and drop them down the mail chute in Miss Riley's office."

"So all in two minutes," Da Costa murmured, "he goes down to 1735, passes 1727 here on the way back, finds the door open or at least unlocked, comes in and opens the coin case, takes the right coin out, stabs Curtis when he's caught doing it, then walks back to the floor office cool as a cucumber, after dropping the knife behind that hall radiator where you found it, and sits down again just like nothing has happened. Not excited at all; not in any kind of crazy panic—and only fifteen years old, he tells me. All he says to Miss Riley is about the money he's saving up for his little sister's birthday next week. How about that, Hannegan? He sure knew how to handle himself, didn't he? *All* in two minutes?"

"Well, like I said," Hannegan said, shrugging insolently. "Them people. Maybe Miss Riley got a degree in child psychology, Lieutenant. You ought to ask her."

"Maybe I ought to start asking a lot of people," Da Costa said. "Starting with you. Were you up on this floor any time tonight before you discovered the body in here?"

"Yeah, flew up," Harry Hannegan said, and laughed jeeringly.

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"Why, none of the elevator operators saw me. Go ahead. Ask them."

"Stairs," Da Costa murmured. "Service stairs. And deserted, I should imagine, about nine-tenths of the time."

"I was up here a bit earlier," Mr. Lenormand said, wiping his face harriedly with the flowing linen handkerchief that he took out of his breast pocket. "Mr. Curtis wanted to discuss the menu for a dinner he was giving for a few friends tomorrow night in the Garden Room. Then when I came out, I passed Mr. Purnell in the hall. I believe he can verify that, if you think it necessary."

"We will," Da Costa said. "Although it looks like the boy, all right. He made a very serious mistake talking to me, even if he doesn't realize that he did. All we need to prove on him now is that he stole the coin and we have him dead to rights."

"Lost his nerve," Harry suggested, "and got rid of it. Probably threw it down one of the toilets."

"Or better yet," Da Costa thought, "dropped it down the mail chute with those letters from 1735. What's your first mail pickup in the morning, Hannegan?"

"I think eight o'clock," Hannegan said. "That right, Mr. Lenormand?"

"I believe so," Mr. Lenormand said, still wiping his face. "But a thing like this to happen at the Versailles! My God!"

"Then have somebody here when the mailman comes around," Da Costa ordered. "If we find the coin down there, we got Ramon. Once we face him with that, we'll give him half an hour downtown with Frank Sandstrum and we'll have the whole story."

But still the man and the woman were very careful, even after it became known the next morning that the coin had been found right where Da Costa had suggested it would be. They arranged a meeting only two weeks later at the East 78th Street apartment. The man got there first and the woman had just taken off her coat when the hall door opened behind them. Da Costa and O'Brien walked in.

"Nice little place," Da Costa said, glancing around casually. "Not so high-toned as the Versailles, of course—but fair enough for what you needed. How long you been meeting here?"

The woman sat down as suddenly as if her legs had given way under her, but the man had better control of himself.

"Now just a minute," he blustered. "You have nothing against

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us. What we're doing here is our own personal business."

Da Costa cuffed him across the mouth with hard knuckles, and cuffed again.

"From a kid named Ramon," he said. "Keep your mouth shut. I don't have to ask what you did because I know it already. You got damned cozy at the Versailles first, meeting each other nearly every day there, and then you got even more cozy in this place. You—" he glanced contemptuously at the woman—"had to set up the first scene. I mean how the old man forgot the coin, or apparently forgot it, leaving it on his desk when he hadn't left it there at all. You also made out that he had begun forgetting a lot of things, giving him the wrong dates for appointments and so on till he began to believe it himself. In addition, you made sure that he said right in Ramon's hearing how much the coin was worth, and if he hadn't said it you'd have slipped it in yourself. Following me so far?"

Neither one answered. The man sat silently. The woman, shaking her head time after time, had become pale as death.

"Then we might as well proceed," Da Costa went on. "I had to prepare the ground too, because I know kids like Ramon, and I knew by the way he acted that he didn't even understand what was happening to him. So I told you"—glancing down contemptuously at the man—"how important the coin was and how Ramon made a very serious mistake when he was talking to me. Well, the coin was important, important as all hell, because whoever took it out of the case obviously killed the old man. Where to find it, though? It could have been hidden in any place at all in the Versailles, if Ramon hadn't taken it.

"So I made another suggestion while we were all in the same room. I suggested that maybe Ramon dropped it down the mail chute, and asked what time the first pickup was the next morning. Only before that I had O'Brien get in touch with the post office and they sent a man up here to open the chute right away, take the letters out, and close it up again, empty.

"And what do you know? The letters from 1735 were in there already, just like Ramon said—but the coin wasn't. Next morning, though, with a lot of other letters, there it was. Which meant that whoever dropped it into the chute, it wasn't Ramon. It couldn't have been. He was in our hands already. See what I mean?"

There was still dead silence. The man had put his head in his hands. The woman had begun to weep brokenly.

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"Guess you do," Da Costa said, his lips curled. "You figured that coin would be the last thing to damn the kid, only it turned out to be the one thing that nailed you. So if it couldn't be Ramon, it had to be somebody else. Who? That was the poser.

"Well, it was quite a little trouble for us, but from then on everybody involved was given a good careful tail wherever he went.

"So what do you think happens? Our hero here leaves the Versailles at two o'clock this afternoon, and his dear lady fifteen minutes later. Then where do you suppose they both come? Right here. And then where do you suppose we come? Right here too. All we have to do then is talk to the superintendent downstairs, get his passkey—and here we are. We know how long ago you've rented the place; we know how long you've been coming here; and so all we have to do is to leave it to a jury as to what the reason might be.

"Slap the cuffs on them, O'Brien. I want them to feel it just the way a little Puerto Rican kid did when I had to do it to him, even if it was only for show that time. Now come on. Up on your feet, both of you. You get one phone call apiece to any lawyer you want, but I'll lay fifty to one that no lawyer can help you. Anybody talking?"

There did not appear to be. Mrs. Curtis, her face stony-hard under the tears, stood up like a sleepwalker. Across from her, his head still in his hands but his eyes open and staring down with savage hopelessness at the brilliantly polished tips of his black shoes, sat the Versailles manager, Mr. Lenormand.

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THE SWEET CORN MURDER

by REX STOUT

(continued from page 33)

At five minutes past nine that evening the three men whose names had had checkmarks in front of them in Kenneth Faber's little notebook were in the office, waiting for Wolfe to show. They hadn't come together; Carl Heydt had arrived first, ten minutes early, then Peter Jay, on the dot at nine, and then Max Maslow. I had put Heydt in the red-leather chair, and Jay and Maslow on two of the yellow ones facing Wolfe's desk. Nearest me was Maslow.

I had seen Heydt before, of course, but you take a new look at a man when he becomes a homicide candidate. He looked the same as ever—medium height with a slight bulge in the middle, round face with a wide mouth, quick dark eyes that kept on the move.

Peter Jay, the something important in a big advertising agency, tall as me but not as broad, with more than his share of chin and a thick dark mane that needed a comb, looked as if he had the regulation ulcer, but it could have been just the current difficulty.

Max Maslow, the fashion photographer, was a surprise. With the twisted smile he must have practised in front of a mirror, the trick haircut, the string tie dangling, and the jacket with four buttons buttoned, he was a screwball if I ever saw one, and I wouldn't have supposed that Sue McLeod would let such a specimen hang on. I admit it could have been just that his ideas were different from mine, but I like mine.

Wolfe came. When there is to be a gathering he stays in the kitchen until I buzz on the house phone, and then he doesn't enter, he makes an entrance. Nothing showy, but it's an entrance. A line from the door to the corner of his desk just misses the red-leather chair, so with Heydt in the chair he would have had to circle around his feet and also pass between Heydt and the other two; and he detoured to his right, between the chair and the wall, to his side of the desk, stood, and shot me a glance.

I pronounced their names, indicating who was which, and he gave them a nod, sat, moved his eyes from left to right and back again, and spoke.

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"This can be fairly brief," he said, "or it can go on for hours. I think, gentlemen, you would prefer brevity, and so would I. I assume you have all been questioned by the police and by the District Attorney or one of his assistants?"

Heydt and Maslow nodded, and Jay said yes. Maslow had his twisted smile on.

"Then you're on record, but I'm not privy to that record. Since you came here to oblige Miss McLeod, you should know our position, Mr. Goodwin's and mine, regarding her. She is not our client; we are under no commitment to her; we are acting solely in our own interest. But as it now stands we are satisfied that she didn't kill Kenneth Faber."

"That's damn nice of you," Maslow said. "So am I."

"Your own interest?" Jay asked. "What's your interest?"

"We're reserving that. We don't know how candid Miss McLeod has been with you, any or all of you, or how devious. I will say only that, because of statements made to the police by Miss McLeod, Mr. Goodwin is under heavy suspicion, and that because she knew the suspicion was unfounded she agreed to ask you gentlemen to come to see me. To lift the suspicion from Mr. Goodwin we must find out where it belongs, and for that we need your help."

"My God," Heydt blurted, "*I* don't know where it belongs."

The other two looked at him, and he looked back. There had been a feel in the atmosphere, and the looks made it more than a feel. Evidently each of them had ideas about the other two, but of course it wasn't as simple as that if one of them had killed Faber, since he would be faking it. Anyhow, they all had ideas and they were itching.

"Quite possibly," Wolfe conceded, "none of you knows. But it is not mere conjecture that one of you has good reason to know. All of you knew he would be there that day at that hour, and you could have gone there at some previous time to reconnoiter. All of you had an adequate motive—adequate, at least, for the one it moved: Mr. Faber had either debased or grossly slandered the woman you wanted to marry.

"All of you had some special significance in his private thoughts or plans; your names were in his notebook, with checkmarks. You are not targets chosen at random for want of better ones; you are plainly marked by circumstances. Do you dispute that?"

Maslow said, "All right, that's our bad luck."

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Heydt, biting his lip, said nothing.

Jay said, "It's no news that we're targets. Go on from there."

Wolfe nodded. "That's the rub. The police have questioned you, but I doubt if they have been importunate; they have been set at Mr. Goodwin by Miss McLeod. I don't know—"

"That's your interest," Jay said. "To get Goodwin from under."

"Certainly. I said so. I—"

"He has known Miss McLeod longer than we have," Maslow said. "He's the hero type. He rescued her from the sticks and started her on the path of glory. He's her hero. I asked her once why she didn't marry him if he was such a prize, and she said he hadn't asked her. Now you say she has set the police on him. Permit me to say I don't believe it. If they're on him they have a damn good reason. Also permit me to say I hope he *does* get from under, but not by making me the goat. I'm no hero."

Wolfe shook his head. "As I said, I'm reserving what Miss McLeod has told the police. She may tell you if you ask her. As for you gentlemen, I don't know how curious the police have been about you. Have they tried seriously to find someone who saw one of you in that neighborhood Tuesday afternoon?

"Of course they have asked you where you were that afternoon, that's mere routine, but have they properly checked your accounts? Are you under surveillance? I doubt it; and I haven't the resources for those procedures. I invite you to eliminate yourselves from consideration if you can. The man who killed Kenneth Faber was in that alley, concealed under that platform, shortly after five o'clock yesterday afternoon. Mr. Heydt. Can you furnish incontestable evidence that you weren't there?"

Heydt cleared his throat. "If I could, I don't have to furnish it to you. It seems to me—oh, what the hell. No, I can't."

"Mr. Jay?"

"Incontestable, no." Jay leaned forward, his chin out. "I came here because Miss McLeod asked me to, but if I understand what you're after I might as well go. You intend to find out who killed Faber and pin it on him. To prove it wasn't Archie Goodwin. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Then count me out. I don't want Goodwin to get it, but neither do I want anyone else to. Not even Max Maslow."

"That's damn nice of you, Pete," Maslow said. "A real pal."

Wolfe turned to him. "You, sir. Can you eliminate yourself?"

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"Not by proving I wasn't there." Maslow flipped a hand. "I must say, Wolfe, I'm surprised at you. I thought you were very tough and cagey, but you've swallowed something. You said we all wanted to marry Miss McLeod. Who fed you that? I admit I do, and as far as I know Carl Heydt does, but not my pal Pete. He's the pay-as-you-go type. I wouldn't exactly call him a Casanova, because Casanova never tried to score by talking up marriage, and that's Pete's favorite gambit. I could name—"

"Stand up." It was his pal Pete, on his feet, with fists, glaring down at him.

Maslow tilted his head back. "I wouldn't, Pete. I was merely—"

"Stand up or I'll slap you out of the chair."

Of course I had plenty of time to get there and in between them, but I was curious. It was likely that Jay, not caring about his knuckles, would go for the jaw, and I wanted to see what effect it would have on the twisted smile.

My curiosity didn't get satisfied. As Maslow came up out of the chair he sidestepped, and Jay had to turn, hauling his right back. He started it for Maslow's jaw by the longest route, and Maslow ducked, came on in, and landed with his right at the very best spot for a bare fist. A beautiful kidney punch.

As Jay started to bend, Maslow delivered another one to the same spot, harder, and Jay went down. He didn't tumble, he just wilted. By then I was there. Maslow went to his chair, sat, breathed, and fingered his string tie. The smile was intact, maybe twisted a little more.

He spoke to Wolfe. "I hope you didn't misunderstand me. I wasn't suggesting that I think he killed Faber. Even if he did I wouldn't want him to get it. On that point we're pals. I was only saying I don't see how you got your reputation if you— You all right, Pete?"

I was helping Jay up. A kidney punch doesn't daze you, it just makes you sick. I asked him if he wanted a bathroom, and he shook his head, and I steered him to his chair. He turned his face to Maslow, muttered a couple of vulgar words, and belched.

Wolfe spoke. "Will you have brandy, Mr. Jay? Whiskey? Coffee?"

Jay shook his head and belched again.

Wolfe turned. "Mr. Heydt. The others have made it clear that if they have information that would help to expose the murderer they won't divulge it. How about you?"

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Heydt cleared his throat. "I'm glad I don't have to answer that," he said. "I don't have to answer it because I have no information that would help. I know Archie Goodwin and I might say we're friends. If he's really in a jam I would want to help if I could. You say Miss McLeod has said something to the police that set them on him, but you won't tell us what she said."

"Ask her. You can give me no information whatever?"

"No."

Wolfe's eyes moved right, to the other two, and back again. "I doubt if it's worth the trouble," he said. "Assuming that one of you killed that man, I doubt if I can get at him from the front; I must go around. But I may have given you a false impression, and if so I wish to correct it. I said that to lift the suspicion from Mr. Goodwin we must find out where it belongs, but that isn't vital, for we have an alternative.

"We can merely shift the suspicion to Miss McLeod. That will be simple, and it will relieve Mr. Goodwin of further annoyance. We'll discuss it after you leave, and decide. You gentlemen may view the matter differently when Miss McLeod is in custody, charged with murder, without bail, but that is your—"

"You're a damn liar." Peter Jay.

"Amazing." Max Maslow. "Where *did* you get your reputation? What do you expect us to do, kick and scream or go down on our knees?"

"Of course you don't mean it." Carl Heydt. "You said you're satisfied that she didn't kill him."

Wolfe nodded. "I doubt if she would be convicted. She might not even go to trial; the police are not blockheads. It will be an ordeal for her, but it will also be a lesson; her implication of Mr. Goodwin may not have been willful, but it was inexcusable." His eyes went to Maslow. "You have mentioned my reputation. I made it and I don't risk it rashly. If tomorrow you learn that Miss McLeod has been arrested and is inaccessible, you may—"

" 'If.' " That crooked smile.

"Yes. It is contingent not on our power but on our preference. I am inviting you gentlemen to have a voice in our decision. You have told me nothing whatever, and I do not believe that you have nothing whatever to tell. Do you want to talk now, to me, or later, to the police, when that woman is in a pickle?"

"You're bluffing," Maslow said. "I call." He got up and headed for the hall. I got up and followed him out, got his hat from the

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shelf, and opened the front door; and as I closed it behind him and started back down the hall here came the other two. I opened the door again, and Jay, who had no hat, went by and on out, but Heydt stood there. I got his hat and he took it and put it on.

"Look, Archie," he said. "You've got to do something."

"Check," I said. "What, for instance?"

"I don't know. But about Sue—my God, he doesn't mean it, does he?"

"It isn't just a question of what he means, it's also what I mean. Damn it, I'm short on sleep, and I may soon be short on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Get the news every hour on the hour. Pleasant dreams."

"What did Sue tell the police about you?"

"No comment. My resistance is low and with the door open I might catch cold. If you don't mind?"

He went. I shut the door, put the chain bolt on, returned to the office, sat at my desk, and said, "So you thought it might be useful."

He grunted. "Have you finished it?"

"Yes. Twelve pages."

"May I see it?"

Not an order, a request. At least he was remembering that it was now a joint affair. I opened a drawer, got the original, and took it to him. He inspected the heading and the first page, flipped through the sheets, took a look at the end, dropped it on his desk, and said, "Your notebook, please." I sat and got my notebook and pen.

"There will be two," he said, "one for you and one for me. First mine. Heading in caps, affidavit by Nero Wolfe. The usual State of New York, County of New York. The text: I hereby depose that the twelve foregoing typewritten pages attached hereto, comma, each page initialed by me, comma, are a full and accurate record of a conversation that took place in my office on October thirteenth, nineteen sixty-one, by Susan McLeod, comma, Archie Goodwin, comma, and myself, semicolon; that nothing of consequence has been omitted or added in this typewritten record, semicolon; and that the conversation was wholly impromptu, comma, with no prior preparation or arrangement. A space for my signature, and below, the conventional formula for notarizing. The one for you, on the same sheet if there is room, will be the same with the appropriate changes."

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I looked up. "All right, it wasn't just to keep me off your neck. Okay on the power. But there's still the if on the preference. She didn't kill him. She came to me and opened the bag. I'm her hero. She as good as told Maslow that she'd marry me if I asked her. Maybe she could learn how to dance if she tried hard, though I admit that's doubtful. She makes a lot more than you pay me, and we could postpone the babies. You said you doubt if she would be convicted, but that's not good enough. Before I sign that affidavit I would need to know that you won't chuck the joint affair as soon as the heat is off of me."

"Rrrhhh," he said.

"I agree," I said, "it's a damn nuisance. It's entirely her fault, she dragged me in without even telling me, and if a girl pushes a man in a hole he has a right to wiggle out, but you must remember that I am now a hero. Heroes don't wiggle. Will you say that it will be our joint affair to make sure she doesn't go to trial?"

"I wouldn't say that I will make sure of anything whatever."

"Correction. That you will be concerned?"

He took air in, all the way, through his nose, and let it out through his mouth. "Very well. I'll be concerned." He glanced at the twelve pages on his desk. "Will you bring Miss Pinelli to my room at five minutes to nine in the morning?"

"No. She doesn't get to her office until nine thirty."

"Then bring her to the plant rooms at nine forty with the affidavit." He looked at the wall clock. "You can type it in the morning. You've had no sleep for forty hours. Go to bed."

That was quite a compliment, and I was appreciating it as I mounted the stairs to my room. Except for a real emergency he will permit no interruptions from nine to eleven in the morning, when he is in the plant rooms, but he wasn't going to wait until he came down to the office to get the affidavit notarized.

As I got into bed and turned the light off I was considering whether to ask for a raise now or wait till the end of the year, but before I made up my mind I didn't have a mind. It was gone.

I never did actually make up my mind about passing the buck to Sue. I was still on the fence after breakfast Thursday morning, when I dialed the number of Lila Pinelli, who adds maybe two bucks a week to the take of her secretarial service in a building on Eighth Avenue by doubling as a notary public. Doing the af-

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fidavits didn't commit me to anything; the question was, what then?

So I asked her to come, and she came, and I took her up to the plant rooms. She was in a hurry to get back, but she had never seen the orchids, and no one alive could just breeze on by those benches, with everything from the neat little *Oncidiums* to the big show-offs like the *Laeliocattleyas.* So it was after ten o'clock when we came back down and I paid her and let her out, and I went to the office and put the document in the safe.

As I say, I never did actually make up my mind; it just happened. At ten minutes past eleven Wolfe, having come down at eleven as usual, was at his desk looking over the morning crop of mail, and I was at mine sorting the germination slips he had brought, when the doorbell rang. I stepped to the hall for a look, turned, and said, "Cramer. I'll go hide in the cellar."

"Confound it," he growled. "I wanted—very well."

"There's no law about answering doorbells."

"No. We'll see."

I went to the front, opened up, said good morning, and gave him room. He crossed the sill, took a folded paper from a pocket, and handed it to me. I unfolded it, and a glance was enough, but I read it through. "At least my name's spelled right," I said. I extended my hands, the wrists together. "Okay, do it right."

"You'd clown in the chair," he said. "I want to see Wolfe."

He marched down the hall and into the office. Very careless. I could have scooted on out and away, and for half a second I considered it, but I wouldn't have been there to see the look on his face when he found I was gone. When I entered the office he was lowering his fanny onto the red-leather chair and putting his hat on the stand beside it. Also he was speaking.

"I have just handed Goodwin a warrant for his arrest," he was saying, "and this time he'll stay."

I stood. "It's an honor," I said. "Anyone can be banged by a bull or a dick. It takes me to be pinched by an Inspector, and twice in one week."

His eyes stayed at Wolfe. "I came myself," he said, "because I want to tell you how it stands. A police officer with a warrant to serve is not only allowed to use his discretion, he's supposed to. I know damn well what Goodwin will do—he'll clam up, and a crowbar wouldn't pry him open. Give me that warrant, Goodwin."

"It's mine. You've served it."

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"I have not. I just showed it to you." He stretched an arm and took it. "When I was here Tuesday night," he told Wolfe, "you were dumfounded by my fatuity. So you said in your fancy way. All you cared about was who picked that corn. I came myself to see how you feel now. Goodwin will talk if you tell him to. Do you want me to wait in the front room while you discuss it? Not all day, say ten minutes. I'm giving you a—"

He stopped to glare. Wolfe had pushed his chair back and was rising, and of course Cramer thought he was walking out. It wouldn't have been the first time. But Wolfe headed for the safe, not the hall. As he turned the handle and pulled the door open, there I was. If he had told me to bring it instead of going for it himself, I could have stalled while I made up my mind, even with Cramer there; but as I have said twice before I never did actually make up my mind.

I merely went to my desk and sat. I owed Sue McLeod nothing. If either she or I was going to be cooped, there were two good reasons why it should be her: she had made the soup herself, and I wouldn't be much help in the joint affair if I was salted down. So I sat, and Wolfe got it from the safe, went and handed it to Cramer, and spoke. "I suggest that you look at the affidavits first. The last two sheets."

Over the years I have made a large assortment of cracks about Inspector Cramer, but I admit he has his points. Having inspected the affidavits, he went through the twelve pages fast, and then he went back and started over and took his time. Altogether, more than half an hour; and not once did he ask a question or even look up. And when he finished, even then no questions.

Lieutenant Rowcliff or Sergeant Purley Stebbins would have kept at us for an hour. Cramer merely gave each of us a five-second-straight hard look, folded the document, put it in his inside breast pocket, rose and came to my desk, picked up the phone, and dialed. In a moment he spoke.

"Donovan? Inspector Cramer. Give me Sergeant Stebbins." In another moment: "Purley? Get Susan McLeod. Don't call her, get her. Go yourself. I'll be there in ten minutes and I want her there fast. Take a man along. If she balks, wrap her up and carry her."

He cradled the phone, went and got his hat, and marched out.

Of all the thousand or more times I have felt like putting vinegar in Wolfe's beer, I believe the closest I ever came to doing it

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was that Thursday evening when the doorbell rang at a quarter past nine, and after a look at the front I told him that Carl Heydt, Max Maslow, and Peter Jay were on the stoop, and he said they were not to be admitted.

In the nine and a half hours that had passed since Cramer had used my phone to call Purley Stebbins I had let it lie. I couldn't expect Wolfe to start any fur flying until there was a reaction, or there wasn't, say by tomorrow noon, to what had happened to Sue. However, I had made a move on my own.

When Wolfe had left the office at four o'clock to go up to the plant rooms, I had told him I would be out on an errand for an hour or so, and I had taken a walk, to Rusterman's, thinking I might pick up some little hint.

I didn't. First I went out back for a look at the platform and the alley, which might seem screwy, since two days and nights had passed and the city scientists had combed it, but you never know. I once got an idea just running my eye around a hotel room where a woman had spent a night six months earlier. But I got nothing from the platform or alley except a scraped ear from squeezing under the platform and out again, and after talking with Felix and Joe and some of the kitchen staff I crossed it off.

No one had seen or heard anyone or anything until Zoltan had stepped out for a cigarette (no smoking is allowed in the kitchen) and had seen the station wagon and the body on the ground.

I would have let it ride that evening, no needling until tomorrow noon. When Lily Rowan phoned around seven o'clock and said Sue had phoned her from the D.A.'s office that she was under arrest and had to have a lawyer and would Lily send her one, and Lily wanted me to come and tell her what was what, I would have gone if I hadn't wanted to be on hand if there was a development. But when the development came Wolfe told me not to let it in.

I straight-eyed him. "You said you'd be concerned."

"I am concerned."

"Then here they are. You tossed her to the wolves to open them up, and here—"

"No. I did that to keep you out of jail. I am considering how to deal with the problem, and until I decide, there is no point in seeing them. Tell them they'll hear from us."

The doorbell rang again. "Then I'll see them. In the front room."

"No. Not in my house." He went back to his book.

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Either put vinegar in his beer or get the Marley .32 from my desk drawer and shoot him dead, but that would have to wait; they were on the stoop. I went and opened the door enough for me to slip through, did so, bumping into Carl Heydt, and pulled the door shut. "Good evening," I said. "Mr. Wolfe is busy on an important matter and can't be disturbed. Do you want to disturb me instead?"

They all spoke at once. The general idea seemed to be that I would open the door and they would handle the disturbing.

"You don't seem to realize," I told them, "that you're up against a genius. So am I, only I'm used to it. You were damn fools to think he was bluffing. You might have known he would do exactly what he said."

"Then he did?" Peter Jay. "He did it?"

"We did. I share the glory. We did."

"Glory hell." Max Maslow. "You know Sue didn't kill Ken Faber. He said so."

"He said we were satisfied that she didn't. We still are. He also said that we doubt if she'll be convicted. He also said that our interest was to get me from under, and we had alternatives. We could either find out who killed Faber, for which we needed your help; or, if you refused to help, we could switch it to Sue.

"You refused, and we switched it, and I am in the clear, and here you are. Why? Why should he waste time on you now? He *is* busy on an important matter; he's reading a book entitled *My Life in Court*, by Louis Nizer. Why should he put it down for you?"

"I can't believe it, Archie." Carl Heydt had hold of my arm. "I can't believe you'd do a thing like this—to Sue—when you say she didn't—"

"You never can tell, Carl. There was that woman who went to the park every day to feed the pigeons, but she fed her husband arsenic. I have a suggestion. This is Mr. Wolfe's house and he doesn't want you in it, but if you guys have changed your minds, at least two of you, about helping to find out who killed Faber, I'm a licensed detective too and I could spare a couple of hours. We can sit here on the steps, or we can go somewhere—"

"And you can tell us," Maslow said, "what Sue told the cops that got them on you. I may believe that when I hear it."

"You won't hear it from me. That's not the idea. *You* tell *me* things. I ask questions and you answer them. If I don't ask them, who will? I doubt if the cops or the D.A. will; they've got too good

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a line on Sue. I'll tell you this much, they know she was there Tuesday at the right time, and they know that she lied to them about what she was there for and what she saw. I can spare an hour or two."

They exchanged glances, and they were not the glances of buddies with a common interest. They also exchanged words and found they agreed on one point: if one of them took me up they all would. Peter Jay said we could go to his place and they agreed on that too, and we descended to the sidewalk and headed east. At Eighth Avenue we flagged a taxi with room for four. It was ten minutes to ten when it rolled to the curb at a marquee on Park Avenue in the Seventies.

Jay's apartment, on the fifteenth floor, was quite a perch for a bachelor. The living room was high, wide, and handsome, and it would have been an appropriate spot for our talk, since it was there that Sue McLeod and Ken Faber had first met; but Jay took us on through to a room, smaller but also handsome, with chairs and carpet of matching green, a desk, bookshelves, and a TV-player cabinet. He asked us what we would drink but got no orders, and we sat.

"All right, ask your questions," Maslow said. The twisted smile.

He was blocking my view of Heydt, and I shifted my chair. "I've changed my mind," I said. "I looked it over on the way, and I decided to take another tack. Sue told the police, and it was in her signed statement, that she and I had arranged to meet there at the alley at five o'clock, and she was late, she didn't get there until five fifteen, and I wasn't there, so she left. She had to tell them she was there because she had been seen in front of the restaurant, just around the corner, by two of the staff, who know her."

Their eyes were glued on me. "So you weren't there at five fifteen," Jay said. "The body was found at five fifteen. So you had been and gone?"

"No. Sue also told the police that Faber had told her on Sunday that he had told me on Tuesday that she was pregnant and he was responsible. He had told you that, all three of you. She said that was why she and I were going to meet there, to make Faber swallow his lies. So it's fair to say she set the cops on me, and it's no wonder they turned on the heat. The trouble—"

"Why not?" Maslow demanded. "Why isn't it still on?"

"Don't interrupt. The trouble was, she lied. Not about what

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Faber had told her on Sunday he had told me on Tuesday; that was probably *his* lie; he probably had told her that, but it wasn't true; he had told me nothing on Tuesday. That's why your names in his notebook had checkmarks but mine didn't; he was going to feed us that to put the pressure on Sue, and he had fed it to you but not me. So that was his lie, not Sue's. Hers was about our arranging to meet there Tuesday afternoon to have it out with Faber. We hadn't arranged anything. She also—"

"So *you* say." Peter Jay.

"Don't interrupt. She also lied about what she did when she got there at five fifteen. She said she saw I wasn't there and left. Actually she went down the alley, saw Faber's body there on the ground with his skull smashed, panicked, and blew. The time thing—"

"So *you* say." Peter Jay.

"Shut up. The time thing is only a matter of seconds. Sue says she got there at five fifteen, and the record says that a man coming from the kitchen discovered the body at five fifteen. Sue may be off half a minute, or the man may. Evidently she had just been and gone when the man came from the kitchen."

"Look, pal." Maslow had his head cocked and his eyes narrowed. "Shut up? Go soak your head. Who's lying, Sue or you?"

I nodded. "That's a fair question. Until noon today, a little before noon, they thought I was. Then they found out I wasn't. They didn't just guess again, they found out, and that's why they took her down and they're going to keep her. Which—"

"How did they find out?"

"Ask them. You can be sure it was good. They were liking it fine, having me on a hook, and they hated to see me flop off. It had to be good, and it was. Which brings me to the point. I think Sue's lie was part truth. I think she *had* arranged with someone to meet her there at five o'clock.

"She got there fifteen minutes late and he wasn't there, and she went down the alley and saw Faber dead, and what would she think? That's obvious. No wonder she panicked. She went home and looked it over. She couldn't deny she had been there because she had been seen. If she said she had gone there on her own to see Faber, alone, they wouldn't believe she hadn't gone in the alley, and they certainly *would* believe she had killed him.

"So she decided to tell the truth, part of it, that she had arranged to meet someone and she got there late and he wasn't

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there and she had left—leaving out that she had gone in the alley and seen the body. But since she thought that the man she had arranged to meet had killed Faber she couldn't name him; but they would insist on her naming him. So she decided to name me. It wasn't so dirty really; she thought I could prove I was somewhere else, having decided not to meet her. I couldn't, but she didn't know that." I turned a palm up. "So the point is, who had agreed to meet her there?"

Heydt said, "That took a lot of cutting and fitting, Archie."

"You were going to ask questions," Maslow said. "Ask one we can answer."

"I'll settle for that one," I said. "Say it was one of you, which of course I *am* saying. I don't expect him to answer it. If Sue stands pat and doesn't name him and it gets to where he has to choose between letting her go to trial and unloading, he might come across, but not here and now. But I do expect the other two to consider it.

"Put it another way: if Sue decided to jump on Faber for the lies he was spreading around and to ask one of you to help, which one would she pick? Or still another: which one of you would be most likely to decide to jump Faber and ask Sue to join in? I like the first one better because it was probably her idea." I looked at Heydt. "What about it, Carl? Just a plain answer to a plain question. Which one would she pick? You?"

"No. Maslow."

"Why?"

"He's articulate and he's tough. I'm not tough, and Sue knows it."

"How about Jay?"

"My God, no. I hope not. She must know that nobody can depend on him for anything that takes guts."

Jay left his chair, and his hands were fists as he moved. Guts or not, he certainly believed in making contact. Thinking that Heydt probably wasn't as well educated as Maslow, I got up and blocked Jay off, and darned if he didn't swing at me, or start to. I got his arm and whirled him and shoved, and he stumbled but managed to stay on his feet. As he turned, Maslow spoke.

"Hold it, Pete. I have an idea. There's no love lost among us three, but we all feel the same about this Goodwin. He's a persona non grata if I ever saw one." He got up. "Let's bounce him. Not just a nudge, the bum's rush. Care to help, Carl?"

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Heydt shook his head. "No, thanks. I'll watch."

"Okay. It'll be simpler if you just relax, Goodwin."

I couldn't turn and go, leaving my rear open. "I hope you won't tickle," I said, backing up a step.

"Come in behind, Pete," Maslow said, and started, slow, his elbows out a little and his open hands extended and up some. Since he had been so neat with the kidney punch he probably knew a few tricks, maybe the armpit or the apple, and with Jay on my back I would have been a setup, so I doubled up and whirled, came up bumping Jay, and gave him the edge of my hand, as sharp as I could make it, on the side of his neck, the tendon below the ear.

It got exactly the right spot and so much for him, but Maslow had my left wrist and was getting his shoulder in for the lock, and in another tenth of a second I would have been meat. The only way to go was down, and I went, sliding off his shoulder and bending my elbow into his belly, and he made a mistake. Having lost the lock, he reached for my other wrist. That opened him up, and I rolled into him, brought my right arm around, and had his neck with a knee in his back.

"Do you want to hear it crack?" I asked him, which was bad manners, since he couldn't answer. I loosened my arm a little. "I admit I was lucky. If Jay had been sideways you would have had me."

I looked at Jay, who was on a chair, rubbing his neck. "If you want to play games you ought to take lessons. Maslow would be a good teacher." I unwound my arm and got erect. "Don't bother to see me out," I said and headed for the front.

I was still breathing a little fast when I emerged to the sidewalk, having straightened my tie and run my comb through my hair in the elevator. My watch said twenty past ten. Also in the elevator I had decided to make a phone call, so I walked to Madison Avenue, found a booth, and dialed one of the numbers I knew best.

Miss Lily Rowan was in and would be pleased to have me come and tell her things, and I walked the twelve blocks to the number on 63rd Street where her penthouse occupies the roof.

Since it wasn't one of Wolfe's cases with a client involved, but a joint affair, and since it was Lily who had started Sue on her way at my request, I gave her the whole picture. Her chief reactions were (a) that she didn't blame Sue and I had no right to, I should

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feel flattered; (b) that I had to somehow get Sue out of it without involving whoever had removed such a louse as Kenneth Faber from circulation; and (c) that if I did have to involve him she hoped to heaven it wasn't Carl Heydt because there was no one else around who could make clothes that were fit to wear, especially suits.

She had sent a lawyer to Sue, Bernard Ross, and he had seen her and had phoned an hour before I came to report that she was being held without bail and he would decide in the morning whether to apply for a writ.

It was after one o'clock when I climbed out of a cab in front of the old brownstone on West 35th Street, mounted the stoop, used my key, went down the hall to the office and switched the light on, and got a surprise. Under a paperweight on my desk was a note in Wolfe's handwriting. It said:

> AG: Saul will take the car in the morning, probably for most of the day. His car is not presently available. NW

I went to the safe, manipulated the knob, opened the door, got the petty-cash book from the drawer, flipped to the current page, and saw an entry:

10/14 SP exp AG 100

I put it back, shut the door, twirled the knob, and considered. Wolfe had summoned Saul, and he had come and had been given an errand for which he needed a car. What errand, for God's sake? Not to drive to Putnam County to get the corn that had been ordered for Friday; for that he wouldn't need to start in the morning, he wouldn't need a hundred bucks for possible expenses, and the entry wouldn't say "exp AG." It shouldn't say that anyway since I wasn't a paying client; it should say "exp JA" for joint affair.

And if we were going to split the outlay I should damn well have been consulted beforehand. But up in my room, as I took off and put on, what was biting me was the errand. In the name of the Almighty Lord what and where was the errand?

Wolfe eats breakfast in his room from a tray taken up by Fritz, and ordinarily I don't see him until he comes down from the plant rooms at eleven o'clock. If he has something important or compli-

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cated for me he sends word by Fritz for me to go up to his room; for something trivial he gets me on the house phone. That Friday morning there was neither word by Fritz nor the buzzer, and after a late and leisurely breakfast in the kitchen, having learned nothing new from the report of developments in the morning papers on the Sweet Corn Murder, as the *Gazette* called it, I went to the office and opened the mail.

If Wolfe saw fit to keep Saul's errand strictly private, he could eat wormy old corn boiled in water before I'd ask him. I decided to go out for a walk and was starting for the kitchen to tell Fritz when the phone rang. I got it, and a woman said she was the secretary of Mr. Bernard Ross, counsel for Miss Susan McLeod, and Mr. Ross would like very much to talk with Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Goodwin at their earliest convenience. He would appreciate it if they would call at his office today, this morning if possible.

I would have enjoyed telling Wolfe that Bernard Ross, the celebrated attorney, didn't know that Nero Wolfe, the celebrated detective, never left his house to call on anyone whoever, but since I wasn't on speaking terms with him I had to skip it. I told the secretary that Wolfe couldn't but I could and would, went and told Fritz I would probably be back for lunch, put a carbon copy of the twelve-page conversation with affidavits in my pocket, and departed.

I did get back for lunch, just barely. Including the time he took to study the document I had brought, Ross kept me a solid two hours and a half. When I left he knew nearly everything I did, but not quite; I omitted a few items that were immaterial as far as he was concerned—for instance, that Wolfe had sent Saul Panzer somewhere to do something. Since I couldn't tell him where, to do what, there was no point in mentioning it.

I would have preferred to buy my lunch somewhere, say at Rusterman's, rather than sit through a meal with Wolfe, but he would be the one to gripe, not me, if he didn't know where I was. Entering his house, and hearing him in the dining room speaking to Fritz, I went first to the office, and there on my desk under a paperweight were four sawbucks. Leaving them there, I went to the dining room and said good morning, though it wasn't.

Wolfe nodded and went on dishing shrimps from a steaming casserole. "Good afternoon. That forty dollars on your desk can be returned to the safe. Saul had no expenses and I gave him sixty dollars for his six hours."

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"His daily minimum is eighty."

"He wouldn't take eighty. He didn't want to take anything, since this is our personal affair, but I insisted. This shrimp Bordelaise is without onions but has some garlic. I think an improvement, but Fritz and I invite your opinion."

"I'll be glad to give it. It smells good." I sat. That was by no means the first time the question had arisen whether he was more pigheaded than I was strong-minded. I was supposed to explode. I was supposed to demand to know where and how Saul had spent the six hours, and he would then be good enough to explain that he had got an idea last night in my absence, and, not knowing where I was, he had had to call Saul. So I wouldn't explode. I would eat shrimp Bordelaise without onions but with garlic and like it.

Obviously, whatever Saul's errand had been, it had been a washout, since he had returned, reported, and been paid off. So it was Wolfe's move, since he had refused to see the three candidates when they came and rang the bell, and I would not explode. Nor would I report on last night or this morning unless and until he asked for it.

Back in the office after lunch, he got settled in his favorite chair with *My Life in Court*, and I brought a file of cards from the cabinet and got busy with the germination records. At one minute to four he put his book down and went to keep his date with the orchids. It would have been a pleasure to take the Marley .32 from the drawer and plug him in the back.

I was at my desk, looking through the evening edition of the *Gazette* that had just been delivered, when I heard a noise I couldn't believe. The elevator. I looked at my watch: half-past five. That was unprecedented. He never did that. Once in the plant rooms he stuck there for the two hours, no matter what. If he had a notion that couldn't wait he buzzed me on the house phone, or Fritz if I wasn't there. I dropped the paper and got up and stepped to the hall. The elevator jolted to a stop at the bottom, the door opened, and he emerged.

"The corn," he said. "Has it come?"

For Pete's sake. Being finicky about grub is all right up to a point, but there's a limit. "No," I said. "Unless Saul brought it."

He grunted. "A possibility occurred to me. When it comes—if it comes—no. I'll see for myself. The possibility is remote, but it would be—"

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"Here it is," I said. "Good timing." A man with a carton had appeared on the stoop. As I started to the front the doorbell rang, and as I opened the door Wolfe was there beside me. The man, a skinny little guy in pants too big for him and a bright green shirt, spoke. "Nero Wolfe?"

"I'm Nero Wolfe." He was on the sill. "You have my corn?"

"Right here." He put the carton down and let go of the cord.

"May I have your name, sir?"

"My name's Palmer. Delbert Palmer. Why?"

"I like to know the names of men who render me a service. Did you pick the corn?"

"Hell, no. McLeod picked it."

"Did you pack it in the carton?"

"No, he did. Look here, I know you're a detective. You just ask questions from habit, huh?"

"No, Mr. Palmer. I merely want to be sure about the corn. I'm obliged to you. Good day, sir." He bent over to slip his fingers under the cord, lifted the carton, and headed for the office. Palmer told me distinctly, "It takes all kinds," turned, and started down the steps, and I shut the door.

In the office Wolfe was standing eyeing the carton, which he had put on the seat of the red-leather chair. As I crossed over he said without looking up, "Get Mr. Cramer."

It's nice to have a man around who obeys orders no matter how batty they are and saves the questions for later. That time the questions got answered before they were asked. I went to my desk, dialed Homicide South, and got Cramer, and Wolfe, who had gone to his chair, took his phone.

"Mr. Cramer? I must ask a favor. I have here in my office a carton which has just been delivered to me. It is supposed to contain corn, and perhaps it does, but it is conceivable that it contains dynamite and a contraption that will detonate it when the cord is cut and the flaps raised. My suspicion may be groundless, but I have it.

"I know this is not your department, but you will know how to proceed. Will you please notify the proper person without delay? . . . That can wait until we know what's in the carton. . . . Certainly. Even if it contains only corn I'll give you all relevant information. . . . No, there is no ticking sound. If it does contain explosive there is almost certainly no danger until the carton is opened. . . . Yes, I'll make sure."

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He hung up, swiveled, and glared at the carton. "Confound it," he growled, "again. We'll get some somewhere before the season ends."

The first city employee to arrive, four or five minutes after Wolfe hung up, was one in uniform. Wolfe was telling me what Saul's errand had been when the doorbell rang, and since I resented the interruption I trotted to the front, opened the door, saw a prowl car at the curb, and demanded rudely, "Well?"

"Where's that carton?" he demanded back.

"Where it will stay until someone comes who knows something." I was shutting the door but his foot was there.

"You're Archie Goodwin," he said. "I know about you. I'm coming in. Did you yell for help or didn't you?"

He had a point. An officer of the law doesn't have to bring a search warrant to enter a house whose owner has asked the police to come and get a carton of maybe dynamite. I gave him room to enter, shut the door, took him to the office, pointed to the carton, and said, "If you touch it and it goes off we can sue you for damages."

"You couldn't pay me to touch it," he said. "I'm here to see that nobody does."

He glanced around, went over by the big globe, and stood, a good fifteen feet away from the carton. With him there, the rest of the explanation of Saul's errand had to wait, but I had something to look at to pass the time—a carbon copy, one sheet, which Wolfe had taken from his desk drawer and handed me, of something Saul had typed on my machine during my absence Thursday evening.

The second city employee to arrive, at ten minutes to six, was Inspector Cramer. When the bell rang and I went to let him in, the look on his face was one I had seen before. He knew Wolfe had something fancy by the tail, and he would have given a month's pay before taxes to know what. He tramped to the office, saw the carton, turned to the cop, got a salute but didn't acknowledge it, and said, "You can go, Schwab."

"Yes, sir. Stay out front?"

"No. You won't be needed."

Fully as rude as I had been, but he was a superior officer. Schwab saluted again and went. Cramer looked at the red-leather chair. He always sat there, but the carton was on it. I moved up

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one of the yellow ones, and he sat, took his hat off, dropped it on the floor, and asked Wolfe, "What is this, a gag?"

Wolfe shook his head. "It may be a bugaboo, but I'm not crying wolf. I can tell you nothing until we know what's in the carton."

"The hell you can't. When did it come?"

"One minute before I telephoned you."

"Who brought it?"

"A stranger. A man I had never seen before."

"Why do you think it's dynamite?"

"I think it may be. I reserve further information until—"

I missed the rest because the doorbell rang and I went. It was the bomb squad, two of them. They were in uniform, but one look and you knew they weren't flatties—if nothing else, their eyes. When I opened the door I saw another one down on the sidewalk, and their special bus, with its made-to-order enclosed body, was double-parked in front.

I asked, "Bomb squad?" and the shorter one said, "Right," and I convoyed them to the office. Cramer, on his feet, returned their salute, pointed to the carton, and said, "It may be just corn. I mean the kind of corn you eat. Or it may not. Nero Wolfe thinks not. He also thinks it's safe until the flaps are opened, but you're the experts. As soon as you know, phone me here. How long will it take?"

"That depends, Inspector. It could be an hour, or ten hours—or it could be never."

"I hope not never. Will you call me here as soon as you know?"

"Yes, sir."

The other one, the taller one, had stooped to press his ear against the carton and kept it there. He raised his head, said, "No comment," eased his fingers under the carton's bottom, a hand at each side, and came up with it. I said, "The man who brought it carried it by the cord," and got ignored. They went, the one with the carton in front, and I followed to the stoop, watched them put it in the bus, then I returned to the office. Cramer was in the red-leather chair, and Wolfe was speaking.

". . . But if you insist, very well. My reason for thinking it may contain an explosive is that it was brought by a stranger. My name printed on it was as usual, but naturally such a detail would not be overlooked. There are a number of people in the metropolitan area who have reason to wish me ill, and it would be imprudent—"

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"My God, you can lie."

Wolfe tapped the desk with a fingertip. "Mr. Cramer. If you insist on lies you'll get them. Until I know what's in that carton. Then we'll see." He picked up his book, opened to his place, and swiveled to get the light right.

Cramer was stuck. He looked at me, started to say something, and vetoed it. He couldn't get up and go because he had told the Bomb Squad to call him there, but an Inspector couldn't just sit. He took a cigar from a pocket, looked at it, put it back, arose, came to me, and said, "I've got some calls to make." Meaning he wanted my chair, which was a good dodge since it got *some* action; I had to move.

He stayed at the phone nearly half an hour, making four or five calls, none of which sounded important, then got up and went over to the big globe and started studying geography. Ten minutes was enough for that and he switched to the bookshelves. Back at my desk, leaning back with my legs crossed, my hands clasped behind my head, I noted which books he took out and looked at.

Now that I knew who had killed Ken Faber, little things like that were interesting. The one he looked at longest was *The Coming Fury* by Bruce Catton. He was still at that when the phone rang. I turned to get it, but by the time I had it to my ear he was there. A man asked for Inspector Cramer and I handed it to him and permitted myself a grin as I saw Wolfe put his book down and reach for his phone. He wasn't going to take hearsay, even from an Inspector.

It was a short conversation; Cramer's end of it wasn't more than twenty words. He hung up and went to the red-leather chair. "Okay," he growled. "If you had opened that carton they wouldn't have found all the pieces. You didn't think it was dynamite, you knew it was. Talk."

Wolfe, his lips tight, was breathing deep. "Not me," he said. "It would have been Archie or Fritz, or both of them. And of course my house. The possibility occurred to me, and I came down, barely in time. Three minutes later . . . Pfui. That man is a blackguard."

He shook his head, as if getting rid of a fly. "Well. Shortly after ten o'clock last evening I decided how to proceed, and I sent for Saul Panzer. When he came—"

"Who put that dynamite in that carton?"

"I'm telling you. When he came I had him type something on a

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sheet of paper and told him to drive to Duncan McLeod's farm this morning and give it to Mr. McLeod. Archie. You have the copy."

I took it from my pocket and went and handed it to Cramer. He kept it, but this is what it said:

MEMORANDUM FROM NERO WOLFE
TO DUNCAN MCLEOD

I suggest that you should have in readiness acceptable answers to the following questions if and when they are asked:

1. When did Kenneth Faber tell you that your daughter was pregnant and he was responsible?

2. Where did you go when you drove away from your farm Tuesday afternoon around two o'clock—perhaps a little later—and returned around seven o'clock, late for milking?

3. Where did you get the piece of pipe? Was it on your premises?

4. Do you know that your daughter saw you leaving the alley Tuesday afternoon? Did you see her?

5. Is it true that the man with the bulldozer told you Monday night that he would have to come Wednesday instead of Thursday?

There are many other questions you may be asked; these are only samples. If competent investigators are moved to start inquiries of this nature, you will of course be in a difficult position, and it would be well to anticipate it.

Cramer looked up and aimed beady eyes at Wolfe. "You knew last night that McLeod killed Faber."

"Not certain knowledge. A reasoned conclusion."

"You knew he left his farm Tuesday afternoon. You knew his daughter saw him at the alley. You knew—"

"No. Those were conclusions." Wolfe turned a palm up. "Mr. Cramer. You sat there yesterday morning and read a document

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sworn to by Mr. Goodwin and me. When you finished it you knew *everything* that I knew, and I have learned *nothing* since then. From the knowledge we shared I had concluded that McLeod had killed Faber. You haven't. Shall I detail it?"

"Yes."

"First, the corn. I presume McLeod told you, as he did me, that he had Faber pick the corn because he had to dynamite some stumps and rock."

"Yes."

"That seemed to me unlikely. He knows how extremely particular I am, and also the restaurant. We pay him well, more than well; it must be a substantial portion of his income. He knew that young man couldn't possibly do that job. It must have been something more urgent than stumps and rocks that led him to risk losing such desirable customers. Second, the pipe. It was chiefly on account of the pipe that I wanted to see Mr. Heydt, Mr. Maslow, and Mr. Jay. Any man—"

"When did you see them?"

"They came here Wednesday evening, at Miss McLeod's request. Any man, sufficiently provoked, might plan to kill, but very few men would choose a massive iron bludgeon for a weapon to carry through the streets. Seeing those three, I thought it highly improbable that any of them would. But a countryman might, a man who does rough work with rough and heavy tools."

"You came to a conclusion on stuff like that?"

"No. Those details were merely corroborative. The conclusive item came from Miss McLeod. You read that document. I asked her—I'll quote from memory. I said to her, 'You know those men quite well. You know their temperaments. If one of them, enraged beyond endurance by Mr. Faber's conduct, went there and killed him, which one? It wasn't a sudden fit of passion, it was planned. From your knowledge of them, which one?' How did she answer me?"

"She said, 'They didn't.' "

"Yes. Didn't you think that significant? Of course I had the advantage of seeing and hearing her."

"Sure it was significant. It wasn't the reaction you always get to the idea that some close friend has committed murder. It wasn't shock. She just stated a fact. She *knew* they hadn't."

Wolfe nodded. "Precisely. And I saw and heard her. And there was only one way she could know they hadn't, with such certainty

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in her words and voice and manner: She knew who had. Did you form that conclusion?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you go on? If she hadn't killed him herself but knew who had, and it wasn't one of those three men—isn't it obvious?"

"You slipped that in, if she hadn't killed him herself. Why hadn't she?"

A corner of Wolfe's mouth went up. "There it is, your one major flaw: a distorted conception of the impossible. You will reject as inconceivable such a phenomenon as a man being at two different spots simultaneously, though any adroit trickster could easily contrive it; but you consider it credible that that young woman—even after you had studied her conversation with Mr. Goodwin and me—that she concealed that piece of pipe on her person and took it there with the intention of crushing a man's skull with it. Preposterous. That *is* inconceivable."

He waved it away. "Of course that's academic, now that that wretch has betrayed himself by sending me dynamite instead of corn, and the last step to my conclusion was inevitable. Since she knew who had killed Faber but wouldn't name him, and it wasn't one of those three, it was her father; and since she was certain—I heard and saw her say, 'They didn't'—she had seen him there. I doubt if he knew it, because—but that's immaterial. So much for—"

He stopped because Cramer was up, coming to my desk. He picked up the phone, dialed, and in a moment said, "Irwin? Inspector Cramer. I want Sergeant Stebbins." After another moment: "Purley? Get Carmel, the sheriff's office. Ask him to get Duncan McLeod and hold him, and no mistake . . . Yes, Susan McLeod's father. Send two men to Carmel and tell them to call in as soon as they arrive. Tell Carmel to watch it, McLeod is down for murder and he may be rough . . . No, that can wait. I'll be there soon—half an hour, maybe less."

He hung up, about-faced to Wolfe, and growled, "You knew all this Wednesday afternoon, two days ago."

Wolfe nodded. "And you have known it since yesterday morning. It's a question of interpretation, not of knowledge. Will you please sit? As you know, I like eyes at my level. Thank you. Yes, as early as Wednesday afternoon, when Miss McLeod left, I was all but certain of the identity of the murderer, but I took the pre-

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caution of seeing those three men that evening because it was just possible that one of them would disclose something cogent.

"When you came yesterday morning with that warrant, I gave you that document for two reasons: to keep Mr. Goodwin out of jail, and to share my knowledge with you. I wasn't obliged to share also my interpretation of it. Any moment since yesterday noon I have rather expected to hear that Mr. McLeod had been taken into custody, but no."

"So you decided to share your interpretation with him instead of me."

"I like that," Wolfe said approvingly. "That was neat. I prefer to put it that I decided not to decide. Having given you all the facts I had, I had met my obligation as a citizen and a licensed private detective. I was under no compulsion, legal or moral, to assume the role of a nemesis. It was only conjecture that Faber had told Mr. McLeod that he had debauched his daughter, but he had told others, and McLeod must have had a potent motive, so it was highly probable. If so, the question of moral turpitude was moot, and I would not rule on it.

"Since I had given you the facts, I thought it only fair to inform Mr. McLeod that he was menaced by a logical conclusion from those facts; and I did so. I used Mr. Panzer as my messenger because I chose not to involve Mr. Goodwin. He was unaware of the conclusion I had reached, and if I had told him there might have been disagreement regarding the course to take. He can be—uh—difficult."

Cramer grunted. "Yeah. He can. So you deliberately warned a murderer. Telling him to have answers ready. Nuts. You expected him to lam."

"No. I had no specific expectation. It would have been idle to speculate, but if I had, I doubt if I would have expected him to scoot. He couldn't take his farm along, and he would be leaving his daughter in mortal jeopardy. I didn't consciously speculate, but my subconscious must have, for suddenly, when I was busy at the potting bench, it struck me.

"Saul Panzer's description of McLeod's stony face as he read the memorandum; the stubborn ego of a self-righteous man; dynamite for stumps and rocks; corn; a closed carton. Most improbable. I resumed the potting. But conceivable. I dropped the trowel and went to the elevator, and within thirty seconds after I emerged in the hall the carton came."

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"Luck," Cramer said. "Your damn incredible luck. If it had made mincemeat of Goodwin you might have been willing to admit for once—okay, it didn't." He got up. "Stick around, Goodwin. They'll want you at the D.A.'s office, probably in the morning." To Wolfe: "What if that phone call had said the carton held corn, just corn? You think you could have talked me off, don't you?"

"I could have tried."

"By God. Talk about stubborn egos." Cramer shook his head. "That break you got on the carton. You know, any normal man, if he got a break like that, coming down just in the nick of time, what any normal man would do, he would go down on his knees and thank God. Do you know what you'll do? You'll thank *you*. I admit it would be a job for you to get down on your knees, but—"

The phone rang. I swiveled and got it, and a voice I recognized asked for Inspector Cramer. I turned and told him, "Purley Stebbins," and he came and took it. The conversation was even shorter than the one about the carton, and Cramer's part was only a dozen words and a couple of growls. He hung up, went and got his hat, and headed for the hall, but a step short of the door he stopped and turned.

"I might as well tell you," he said. "It'll give you a better appetite for dinner, even if it's not corn. About an hour ago Duncan McLeod sat or stood or lay on a pile of dynamite and it went off. They'll want to decide whether it was an accident or he did it. Maybe you can help them interpret the facts." He turned and went.

One day last week there was a party at Lily Rowan's penthouse. She never invites more than six to dinner—eight counting her and me—but that was a dancing party and around coffee time a dozen more came and three musicians got set in the alcove and started up. After rounds with Lily and three or four others, I approached Sue McLeod and offered a hand.

She gave me a look. "You know you don't want to. Let's go outside."

I said it was cold, and she said she knew it and headed for the foyer. We got her wrap, a fur thing which she probably didn't own, since topflight models are offered loans of everything from socks to sable, went back in, on through, and out to the terrace. There were evergreens in tubs, and we crossed to them for shelter.

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"You told Lily I hate you," she said. "I don't."

"Not 'hate,' " I said. "She misquoted me or you're misquoting her. She said I should dance with you and I said when I tried it a month ago you froze."

"I know I did." She put a hand on my arm. "Archie. It was hard, you know it was. If I hadn't got my father to let him work on the farm . . . it was my fault, I know it was . . . but I couldn't help thinking if you hadn't sent him that . . . letting him know you knew . . . "

"I didn't send it, Mr. Wolfe did. But I would have. Okay, he was your father, so it was hard. But no matter whose father he was, I'm not wearing an armband for the guy who packed dynamite in that carton."

"Of course not. I know. Of course not. I tell myself I'll have to forget it . . . but it's not easy. . . ." She shivered. "Anyway, I wanted to say I don't hate you. You don't have to dance with me, and you know I'm not going to get married until I can stop working and have babies, and I know you never are, and even if you do, it will be Lily, but you don't have to stand there and let me *really* freeze, do you?"

I didn't. You don't have to be rude, even with a girl who can't dance, and it was cold out there.

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A glimpse of the Old West . . .

THE WEATHERED BOARD

by ALVIN S. FICK

Why they dug their pit at the base of the little hill I don't suppose we will ever know. Maybe it was because there was a scrub pine which provided a bit a shade, a rarity in this section of Wyoming range country where the land starts to rise in anticipation of making the mountains which divide the continent.

Perhaps they were just riding along and stopped to rest the horses. Or they might have been arguing for days, and this spot of dry and seared plains with its greasewood and black sage happened to be where the talk erupted into something more deadly. The territories were not tranquil places.

It could be they sat and smoked in the taciturn manner common to range hands, each hoping for a cooling of blood. But it was not to be. In the end they dug the pit in the loosest soil they could find, probably loosening it further with a piece of pointed rock and throwing the soil out with their hands. They both worked at it, shirts off and the sweat drying almost as soon as it surfaced on the skin. The wind blew little dust devils off the top of the pile of dirt beside the pit.

The sun was low and the shadows were long when they finished. The horses, restless now and eager to move on, nickered and pulled at the reins looped around a branch of the pine.

When the pit was chest-high in depth and oval in shape, they stopped digging. It is likely they climbed out to rest and smoke. When they got back in, they fought with knives, silently.

Only one man crawled out. He slid back in twice on top of the other man, for he was grievously hurt. The smell of blood spooked one of the horses. With a wild tossing of head and rolling of eye it broke loose. The man watched the spurts of dust rise from each hoofbeat as the mount ran off.

Some weeks later a rider drew rein at the spot where a small mound of stones, wrenched from the rib cage of the hill, marred

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the otherwise featureless aspect of the plain. He dismounted slowly, tethered his horse to the pine, and took down from the back of the saddle a board attached to a stake.

He worked with one hand. His right arm hung down, and swung loosely when he walked. A raw scar the color of fresh liver began at his temple, ran down the side of his jaw, under an ear, and disappeared beneath his collar. From time to time he stopped to rest, hunkered on his heels with his good hand pressed to his side under the nerveless arm. He had to prop up the stake with stones in order to drive the sharpened stake with a piece of rock held in his left hand.

When he was finished he rolled a cigarette, spilling two papers of tobacco down his shirt front before he succeeded. It hung unlighted in his mouth. He fished for a match but found none. It took him a long time to reach into his right-hand pants pocket with the good arm. The unsmoked cigarette still dangled from his lips when he rode off.

The section of the Wyoming territory where the men dug their pit is on the edge of the upper Sonoran continental life zone of North America. It is dry country, but it is almost on the verge of the Transitional zone. Sometimes rain washes the sage and the air has a clean sharp bite in the nose. You might come on the grave in the morning after just such a spring rain. Small bright blossoms of wildflowers will spangle the brown sod between the jagged rocks of the hillside.

Wood seldom rots in this dry land. If you ever find this lonely spot you will still be able to read the legend carved into the weathered board nailed across the stake:

LAFE THOMAS
1882
HE LOST

Before you leave, be sure to notice how the drops of water on the needles of the little scrub pine catch the sunshine, breaking the light into glass-like shards which pierce the eye, even as a knife might pierce the heart.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Rand story by
EDWARD D. HOCH

Rand is retired—no longer the Double-C man, no longer the head of the Department of Concealed Communications. He has just returned with his new wife from their honeymoon in Jerusalem (which turned out, of course, to be "a busman's holiday") and has moved into their new home when—did we say Rand is retired? Not on your life! Counterespionage agents never retire, they don't even fade away. As long as there are spies and codes and ciphers and danger to his country's security, Rand will become involved . . .

THE SPY IN THE TOY BUSINESS

by *EDWARD D. HOCH*

As soon as he heard the door chimes, Ravic picked up his Luger and walked quickly to the window. From it he had a good view of the quiet London street and the steps leading up to his front door. He could see a young woman standing on the top step, holding a small child by the hand. They seemed harmless enough, but he kept the Luger in hand behind his back as he went to open the door.

"Yes?"

She was a pretty blonde still in her twenties, and it was obvious from the tight fit of her jeans and sweater that she carried no weapon. "Is this the flat that's for rent?" she asked, acting just a bit vague.

"No, not here," he replied, starting to close the door.

"Oh, dear, I must have the wrong address. What'll we do, Susan?"

The little girl looked up at her with a wondering expression and clutched a curly-haired doll to her chest. "I'm tired of walking," she said.

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The blonde woman said to Ravic, "Do you have a telephone I could use, to check on the address?"

He glanced beyond her at the empty street, fearing a trick of some sort. But she seemed to be alone. His grip on the Luger tightened, but he kept it hidden behind his back. "I suppose so. Come on in." The child helped ease his suspicions. They wouldn't send a child along if there was to be gunplay. Still, he was ready if the woman made a single false move.

She smiled at him and walked directly to the phone he indicated, dialing a number obviously familiar to her. When a voice came on the other end she said, "Mum? Could you look at the ad in the paper and give me the address again? I think I wrote it down wrong."

Ravic smiled down at the child. "How are you, little girl?"

"Tired." She clutched the doll tighter.

"Thanks, Mum," the blonde woman said. "We'll be home as soon as we look at it." She hung up and turned to Ravic with a smile. "Thank you so much. Can I pay you for the call?"

"No, no. Glad to be of service."

"Come on, Susan."

"Do you have the right address now?" he asked.

"It's 865 instead of 665. Don't know how I made such a mistake. My eyes must be failing me."

He showed them to the door, still holding the gun behind his back. "Good luck."

"Thank you."

He watched as they went down the steps to the empty street and then closed the door firmly behind them. All right, he decided, putting down the Luger at last. A false alarm this time, but one couldn't be too careful.

Turning back toward the telephone he saw the curly-haired doll lying on a chair. The child had put it down and forgotten it.

Well, he wasn't going to run after them.

He picked it up . . .

The explosion blew out the windows facing the quiet street and brought people running from their homes. But the blonde woman and the child were already in a car far away.

Rand's first days of retirement after returning with Leila from their honeymoon in Jerusalem were spent in a sort of abstract stocktaking. He busied himself with the task of moving into their

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new home on the outskirts of London, arranging books and sorting through reminders of his past life. He'd be 50 years old on his next birthday, and it seemed as good a time as any to re-examine things.

"You miss it, don't you?" Leila asked one day, coming upon him as he flipped through the pages of a fat volume on codes and ciphers.

"Not at all. Glad to be out of it."

In January Leila would start teaching again, a course in archeology at one of the better small universities. And Rand would get to work on the book he'd always wanted to write. They'd be doing what they liked, with time off to enjoy life and each other.

Still, Rand was curiously interested when he received the letter from Amos Chessman that first week in December. "Here's a man offering me a job," he told Leila. "Maybe I should go see him."

She came up to read over his shoulder. "He's certainly vague about it. Speaks of something in your field."

"I never heard of Amos Chessman, but I'm curious about it." He smiled at her. "That's one of the advantages of being retired—time to satisfy your curiosity."

He rang up Amos Chessman and made an appointment to see him in a few days. Chessman was president of ABC Toys, a computerized company turning out everything from the traditional stuffed animals, dolls and games to more sophisticated playthings and even teaching machines for classroom use. The meeting took place in Chessman's office atop one of London's newer buildings overlooking the Thames. From its windows Rand could see his old office across the river from Parliament.

"Rand?" Amos Chessman asked. "Is that the only name you have?" He was an overstuffed little man, much like his office furniture.

"It's Jeffery Rand."

"Names can be important. Full names. Even middle names can be important." He smiled at some secret joke.

"I see my old home over there," Rand said, sinking into a chair. "With a pair of binoculars you could look right in our windows."

Amos Chessman chuckled. "Did you keep government secrets tacked up on the bulletin boards?"

"Hardly. But then you don't have any toys on display either."

"Frankly, I didn't write to enlist you in the toy business. I'd

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heard that a Mr. Rand just retired from the cipher section of British Intelligence and I have an opening very much in your line." He was interrupted by his secretary, a white-haired woman named Mrs. Terry, who had some letters to be signed.

When they were alone again, Rand asked, "What sort of opening?"

Amos Chessman leaned back in his chair. "As you may know, ABC Toys has a subsidiary involved in the manufacture of teaching machines. For the past year we've been experimenting with a machine somewhat like those used in stockbrokers' offices which could relay information quickly to various locations via a computer hookup. It would save a great deal of time in the business world. There's just one drawback, of course. As in most computer operations, it would be possible for an unauthorized person using one of our desktop terminals to tap into the data bank and intercept messages meant for others. What we need is some sort of cipher for sending the messages, a cipher which could be promptly unscrambled by a machine at the other end. In that way an individual company's messages would be free of interception."

"You want a cipher machine that ties in to a computer and operates automatically."

"Exactly. Can you do it for us?"

Rand thought about it. "I spent a good many years in Concealed Communications working with cipher machines, but I'd hate to have to build one. My main problem, though, is security. You must know, Mr. Chessman, that members of government intelligence agencies like Double-C and the American CIA sign a contract at the beginning of their term of employment. We promise not to enter into a compromising business arrangement which might somehow divulge secret information."

"I'm not asking you to divulge secret information."

"Nevertheless, I don't see how I could undertake the job without using the knowledge gained with Concealed Communications. In designing a cipher machine for your use, I'd naturally be drawing on secrets contained in the most advanced British machines."

Amos Chessman was not pleased. "It seems I got you down here for nothing."

"Not at all. Perhaps I could act in some sort of limited advisory capacity."

Chessman thought about that, toying with a pencil that he tapped on the edge of the desk. "Tell you what, Mr. Rand, I'd like

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you to see my son Richard. He's heading up the Robot Reading division. They've been doing most of the preliminary work because of their experience with teaching machines. It might well be that you can give Richard a hand with some other aspect of the program that doesn't compromise your position." He rose to shake hands, then asked his secretary to ring Richard Chessman.

By this time Rand was becoming increasingly sorry he'd even bothered to follow up the older Chessman's letter. He was certain there was no way he could supply them with information, even in an advisory capacity. He was only wasting their time and his.

But he agreed to see Amos Chessman's son.

Richard's office was on a lower floor of the same building, down a corridor lined with stuffed animals and colorful toys. Where the father's domain had been barren of company products, the son's office was piled high with children's games, model airplanes, talking dolls, and electric trains. There were even a number of typewriter-sized devices that Rand guessed to be Robot Readers.

"Pleased to meet you," Richard Chessman said, extending a hand. He was taller and thinner than his father, but with the same sort of aggressive face and deep-set eyes.

"As I was telling your father, I don't really know that there's much I can help you with."

"Official Secrets Act? That sort of thing?"

"More or less."

He cleared a pile of packaged puzzles from a chair so Rand could sit. "Excuse the looks of this place. It always happens toward Christmas. The other divisions feel my work comes in the pre-school months and that I have nothing to do come autumn. So they load me down with traffic assignments—seeing to it that a shop in Manchester gets two gross of dolls or a toy store in Liverpool receives its allotment of Teddy bears."

"Your father tells me you're working on a new project—some sort of information machine for offices."

"That's right." He indicated one of the Robot Reading machines on a side table. Apparently it had been modified for the new information system. "You see, our need is for some sort of cipher machine attachment to keep the system secure against industrial espionage."

"There is a way in which I might help," Rand said. "As I told your father, I couldn't be involved in designing or building a cipher machine for you, but there's another solution to your prob-

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lem. I gathered the information retrieved from the computer would be displayed on this screen much the way teaching machines normally function."

"That's correct."

"Well, rather than trying to encipher the words and figures at their source, why don't you use a scrambling device for the picture itself? A number of devices are on the market in America, for use with pay television systems. I'm sure one could be adapted to your needs. That way, any unauthorized person cutting in on your transmission would get only a shredded picture impossible to read."

"I like that," Richard Chessman admitted. "Could you work with us on it?"

"You don't really need me. I'd feel guilty taking a fee for such basic advice. Any electronics engineer could have told you the same thing."

"Still, you've been a big help already and I'm sure you could do more for us on this project. I—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of a blonde-haired young woman wearing a short fur jacket over a blue pants suit. "Are you taking me to lunch, Richard?" she asked from the doorway, ignoring Rand's presence.

For just an instant he seemed embarrassed. Then he turned to Rand. "This is my sister, Atlanta."

Rand smiled and took the hand she coolly extended. "An unusual name—after the American city?"

She returned the smile. "No—the ocean."

"I'll be ready in just a moment, Atlanta. Mr. Rand here is giving me some advice on the new information system."

She eyed Rand up and down. "Good for him."

"I don't really think there's anything more I can tell you right now," Rand said. "Why don't you hop off to lunch and you can phone me if any questions come up."

"I'll do just that," Richard Chessman promised. "My father was right about you. I think you can help us a great deal."

Rand left them and rode down in the elevator with a group of giggling secretaries discussing some office gossip.

He was just getting into his car in the parking garage a block from the Chessman Building when he saw a familiar figure approaching between the vehicles. It was Hastings, his immediate

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superior when Rand was head of Concealed Communications.

"Well, Hastings. How've you been? What—?"

"Let me slip into your back seat, Rand. I'll crouch down while you drive out. We shouldn't be seen together."

The idea of old Hastings crouched in the back seat of his little car amused Rand. "What is all this? I'm out of the business, you know—or had you forgotten?"

"Just drive out of here and head for Hyde Park. We can talk there."

Five minutes later, parked on one of the roads adjoining the Serpentine, Rand said, "Now what's this all about?"

Hastings straightened up but remained in the back seat. "We have someone watching the offices of ABC Toys. You can imagine my surprise an hour ago when I received word that you were calling on Amos Chessman."

"I see," Rand said, though he didn't see at all. "ABC Toys is a nest of spies, is it? Sending secret messages to the—who? Russians?—inside stuffed pandas?"

But Hastings wasn't in a mood for jokes. "What's your connection with them, Rand?"

"Amos Chessman tried to hire me as an advisor on a project one of their divisions has in the works. Some sort of information hookup for offices using modified teaching machines. I don't think it's much of an idea, but they didn't want my opinion. They wanted my skill at designing cipher machines."

"I see."

"Good. Then suppose you explain it all to me."

"You're no longer one of us, Rand."

"Then don't explain it. Just get out of my car."

"No need to get testy. I suppose I can trust you if I can trust anyone, after all we've been through over the years."

"I appreciate that," Rand replied with a trace of sarcasm.

"We have information that ABC Toys is a front for a private espionage network, gathering diplomatic and weapons information for the highest bidder—which at present would be certain Middle Eastern oil nations."

"Amos Chessman is behind it?"

"Yes, and probably his son as well."

"I'll admit it helps explain why he approached me. The story about those information machines was pretty thin. How did you stumble onto them?"

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He was watching Hastings' face in the mirror and saw the man hesitate visibly before replying. "A Slav named Ravic contacted us a few months back and offered to sell us information. His story was that he worked for Chessman as a cipher expert. He was no friend of England or NATO, but he decided we might pay better than Chessman."

"Where is he now?"

"We hid him in a flat in Chelsea. Unfortunately he went against our orders and contacted a former co-worker at ABC Toys. We think that enabled them to locate him. In any event, three days ago he was blown apart by a bomb. That's a messy way to end your life, being killed by a bomb."

"A bomb!" During the past few months Rand's life had been tied to the sudden deadly blast of bombs. His old enemy Taz had died of a bomb in Switzerland, and more recently terrorist bombings in London had served as a cover for two killings while he was addressing a meeting of crime writers. It was a manner of killing he especially detested, catching all too often the innocents along with the intended victim.

"Perhaps you read about it in the press, though the police have been keeping mum on details. There are no clues at all, and no hint as to how the killer got close enough to him to plant the bomb in the first place. It didn't come in the mail, and I know Ravic would never have let anyone into his flat. He had a gun and knew how to use it."

"You didn't have a man with him?"

"No," Hastings snapped out. It sounded like an answer he'd been called on to give too many times in recent days. "We have informers and double agents all over England—all over Europe. We can't keep a man on every one of them."

"What do you want me to do about all this?"

"I can't ask you to do anything. You're no longer one of us."

"What do you want me to do?" Rand repeated.

The next day he went to work for ABC Toys.

He was assigned to an office next to Richard Chessman's crowded den at the end of the corridor, and almost at once he found himself working closely with the young man. Chessman had an eye for detail, spotting poor workmanship on a plastic boat as quickly as he put the finger on the reason for a delay in shipments to Scotland.

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"A few more days and this hectic pace will be over," he assured Rand. "We don't accept Christmas orders after the tenth because it's too late to fill them."

"Then you'll get to work on the information system again?"

"Exactly. Meantime, you can be reading over this background data." He pulled out a loose-leaf binder and handed it to Rand. "That should tell you everything you need to know."

But a half hour alone with the pages of feasibility studies and engineering reports convinced Rand it was nothing but a smokescreen. They didn't want his advice on an information system that would probably never be marketed. They wanted him for something much more immediate.

"How do you like it here?" Atlanta Chessman asked him one day when she came up to have lunch with her brother.

"Fine, so far."

She was often around the office, but as near as he could determine she held no official position with any of the divisions of ABC Toys. She was more in the nature of an unpaid advisor to the family business. If she knew anything about the private espionage network maintained within the Chessman organization, she gave no hint of that knowledge.

That day after he'd returned from lunch Rand asked about Atlanta. "Your sister is a very attractive young woman, Richard. Is she married?"

"Not getting ideas, are you?"

"Hardly. I'm just newly married myself."

"Atlanta is divorced. Married a real bounder when she was fresh out of the university. He went off to the south of France somewhere."

"Sorry. I can't imagine anyone deserting her. She seems quite charming."

"Atlanta's all right, for a sister. We're the only children and we've always been quite close. Mother died when we were very young. And of course father was always busy at the office."

"Toys have been profitable for him."

"Toys and other things."

"Like what?"

"Oh, the teaching machine and this latest scheme of his."

"Does ABC Toys have much of an overseas business?"

"Sure—we sell in France and Italy, and some in West Germany. The Common Market, you know."

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"What about the Middle East?" Rand asked casually. "I see Arabs on the streets of London buying everything else these days."

"No, we don't deal with the Middle East," Richard answered, perhaps a little too quickly.

Later that day Rand found an excuse to visit the personnel office on the eighth floor. He asked about an acquaintance named Ravic who'd worked for the company. The girl behind the desk frowned at his question and asked, "Is that the same man Mr. Chessman was asking about last week?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, as I told him, Mr. Ravic left our employ a few weeks ago. We have only his original address. He gave us no forwarding address after he moved."

"I see."

"I saw you with Mr. Chessman in the lift. You work with him, don't you?"

He suddenly realized she was talking about Richard rather than his father. "Yes, the next office. When did you say Richard Chessman asked you about Ravic?"

"Oh, it must have been the middle of last week sometime. I know it wasn't Friday because I took that day off."

Rand thanked her and went back to his office. Richard Chessman had been seeking Ravic's address just a few days before the man was killed. That was interesting. It could mean something. He thought about getting a picture of Richard and showing it around to the neighbors near the Ravic apartment. It was the sort of thing Hastings would never think of because it smacked too much of Scotland Yard routine.

Richard kept a picture of himself and Atlanta in a frame on a side table in his office. The next day, while young Chessman was at lunch, Rand removed the picture long enough to copy it on the office Xerox. The copy was far from perfect but it would serve for identification purposes.

On the next day, Saturday, Rand drove out to the address Hastings had given him and started talking to the neighbors. It was just a week after the explosion that had killed Ravic and they all had their own stories about what they'd been doing at the time of the blast. But all of them seemed unable to identify Richard Chessman as anyone they'd ever seen before.

He was ready to give up when he reached the last house on the

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block. A stout middle-aged woman in a flowered apron came to the door and listened to what he said. "Never saw the man, didn't even know he lived there," she muttered, already starting to shut the door in his face.

"But you did hear the explosion last Saturday?"

"Sure I heard it. Near knocked the mister outa his chair!"

"Let me show you this picture. I want to know if you saw this person on the street the day of the blast."

She studied it carefully. "Not much of a picture."

"It's a copy. What do you think?"

She handed it back to him. "Hard to tell from that, but I think so. I was out in front just before the explosion and I noticed her—"

"*Her?*"

"That's right. She was with a little girl—her daughter, I suppose—and they were hurrying along. I remember because the child was saying she'd left her doll somewhere. I never thought to connect them with the explosion, though. They didn't seem suspicious."

"Thank you," Rand said. "You've been a great help."

Driving back toward the center of London, he tried to sort out the pieces. If Atlanta had visited Ravic at his hideaway, was it prearranged? Did he know her from her visits to Richard's office, or had Ravic's job kept him out of sight?

He knew Richard and some of the others would be working this Saturday, getting out the last of the Christmas orders. And Richard might have some answers for him.

He pulled into the car park across the street from ABC Toys, surprised to see a number of vehicles in front of the building. Several of them were police cars. Amos Chessman's secretary, the white-haired Mrs. Terry, stood near the main entrance, and he saw that she'd been crying.

"What is it, Mrs. Terry? What happened?"

"Someone shot Amos," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "He's dead! He's been murdered!"

It was true. Amos Chessman had been shot through the head while he sat at his desk, apparently by someone using a silenced weapon since no sound had been heard outside his office. Mrs. Terry swore no one had passed her desk, but there was a private entrance Chessman used to avoid the reception area. The

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assassin—the word Mrs. Terry used—must have entered that way, with or without Amos Chessman's invitation.

Rand avoided the police and Scotland Yard men who were questioning employees and went directly to his office. He wasn't surprised to find Richard in the hall with his sister. Both were grim but there were no tears visible. "A terrible thing," Rand said. "You have my deepest sympathy."

"Who'd want to do that to Daddy?" Atlanta asked of no one in particular. "He never harmed a living person, never said an unkind word."

The thought crossed Rand's mind that she might not know the true extent of Amos Chessman's activities. But then he remembered the woman who'd identified the picture. Atlanta Chessman had been on the street where Ravic was hiding just minutes before the explosion. She was no innocent.

"Of course this changes everything," Richard told Rand. "It's even uncertain whether or not we'll proceed with the information system. If we do, there'd surely be a delay of many months. I'll be busy taking over the reins of the company."

"So you won't be needing me."

"Well, you understand, don't you?"

"Certainly."

Richard went off to see about the funeral arrangements, leaving Rand to pick up his few papers while Atlanta hovered in the doorway. "Sorry you weren't with us longer," she said.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way. But I imagine Richard will carry on your father's work."

"The toy business, you mean?"

"That and other things." Rand finished packing his briefcase. "I understand you have a child."

She nodded. "A daughter. That was all my former husband left me with."

Rand decided to drop his bombshell. "You were seen at Ravic's flat."

"I beg your pardon?" The color had drained from her face.

"Ravic—the man who got blown up last week. I understand he once worked here."

"If he did, I never knew him. I know nothing about it."

"But you were there, with your little girl."

"Just who are you, Mr. Rand?"

"I thought you knew. I'm exactly who you hired me to be."

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"I didn't hire you—remember?"

"But your father and your brother did. I was to take Ravic's place in the organization, wasn't I? The new house expert on codes and ciphers."

"I told you I don't know Ravic."

"But you went to see him."

"I—I was doing a favor for my brother. He showed me a picture and asked me to see if the man was staying at that flat. I got in on a pretext, established that he was the man, and left. That's all there was to it."

"You could have left a bomb there."

"I could have, but I didn't."

"Do you know what Richard and your father have been doing here?"

"I don't meddle in company matters."

"ABC Toys is a front for an extensive private espionage network, financed at present by Arab oil money."

"I don't believe that!"

Rand headed for the door. "Ask your brother about it. Tell him what I told you."

The police were still questioning people as he left the building, but no one stopped him.

Leila told him that Hastings had been trying to reach him. Rand put in a call to Hastings' private number and heard the man say, "We should meet again. The same place in the park?"

"Right."

"Leave your car and walk down by the Serpentine. I'll be sitting on a bench there."

Though the city was experiencing some rare December sunshine that Saturday afternoon, the chill air had kept all but the most hearty from strolling in the park. He saw a woman walking her dog, and a young man jogging along one of the paths, but otherwise Rand encountered no one until he reached the bench near the water where Hastings was waiting.

"Aren't you afraid someone might notice us?" Rand asked, half in jest.

"It was safer than coming around to your place. They might be watching that."

"More likely they're lying low after Amos Chessman's killing."

"What do you know about that, Rand?"

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"Nothing. I was out checking Ravic's apartment when it happened."

"Ravic's—"

"Amos Chessman's daughter, Atlanta, was at Ravic's flat just before the bomb went off. A neighbor identified her."

"Interesting."

"Damned interesting. Says her brother asked her to go there, to confirm it was Ravic. Apparently Atlanta and Ravic didn't know each other."

"Ravic was kept pretty much under cover in the organization. He had little contact with others. Do you think she planted the bomb?"

"It's certainly possible." Rand studied his former superior's face. "It's possible you planted it too."

"Are you serious, Rand?"

"There have been times in the past. Remember Colonel Nelson?"

"That was years ago. And if he lied to you it was certainly without departmental sanction. Those days are over, Rand. We don't assassinate our enemies any more. At least not in this country."

"But you lied to me about one thing. I was watching your face in the rearview mirror when I asked about having a man on Ravic. I know enough about operations to realize you wouldn't let him hide out on his own."

Hastings gave a sigh and tossed a pebble at the water. "All right, we did have a man on him. The man's gone, vanished. His name was Cray and he was fairly new. I suppose they might have bought him. That would explain how they knew where Ravic was stashed."

"Why didn't you tell me the other day?"

"Because you'd have suspected exactly what you've come to suspect now—that we played a part in Ravic's death."

"Perhaps."

"Look here, we didn't kill Ravic and we didn't kill Amos Chessman. Whoever did it had their own motives."

"That's just the trouble," Rand said. "I don't see how the same motive could figure in both deaths. Ravic was killed to protect the organization. Chessman was killed to destroy it."

"Or to take it over."

"Yes, there's that possibility too."

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Hastings got to his feet. "Will you still be working there?"

"No. Richard said they no longer needed me, and I made certain my ties were broken by telling Atlanta Chessman what I knew about the espionage organization."

"That was a mistake."

"It could force them out into the open."

"It could get you killed," Hastings said.

Rand nodded. "That too."

"You're a newly married man. You have responsibilities now."

"I'll try to be careful." But as he started to leave he thought of something else. "The woman who identified Atlanta Chessman said something about a doll. The child had left a doll at Ravic's flat."

"That explains it, then. We found a doll, badly scorched by the blast. I wondered about it."

"I'll keep in touch," Rand said.

"Be careful."

Rand still possessed his key to the offices of ABC Toys, and he went back there Saturday evening, after he was reasonably certain the Scotland Yard people had completed their business. He could not reach the executive floor where Amos Chessman's office had been, but that was not his goal. He went instead to the floor housing the firm's computer operations center. In some earlier day the secrets would have been hidden in a safe behind a picture, or in the false bottom of a desk drawer. Now it was more likely they were on a roll of magnetic tape in some bank of computers.

He reached the glass-enclosed computer room without any clear idea of how he could gain access to the information he sought. The access code might well have died with Amos Chessman, though he doubted it. After a few moments' work unlocking the door he entered the windowless room and snapped on the lights. He sat down at the nearest computer keyboard and stared at it for inspiration.

There was an ABC doll on one corner of the desk, probably left there by one of the women programmers. The company's toys were everywhere in the building, used as decorative talismans by many of the female employees.

He stared at the label.

ABC Toys.

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Amos Chessman had mentioned his name once, in that first conversation when Rand answered the invitation about the job. He'd said full names were important, even middle names could be important.

What was Amos Chessman's middle name?

ABC Toys.

Amos B. Chessman.

But what did the B stand for? Blake, Bradley, Black, Benchley . . .

Suddenly the lights went out.

Rand half rose from his seat, knowing he was not alone in the big room. Someone else had entered, seen him, and plunged the computer center into darkness. There was the sharp ping of something hitting metal and Rand dove to the floor. A silenced pistol, and a bullet not far off its mark.

He slid along the floor toward the door, aiming for the light switch. But the other had already realized his error in turning off the lights, and they came back on with Rand halfway to his goal.

He heard the cough of the pistol and rolled to one side, still seeking his assailant.

Then he saw the flash of the weapon from behind a bank of computers. "Come on!" he called out. "We're both after the same thing. Let's talk!"

There was a moment's silence and then a voice called back, "What are you doing here?"

Rand took a chance and stood up in full view. "Looking for the access code to the computer. I suppose that's why you're here too."

The other person stepped out from behind the metal cabinet. He was a tall man with steel-gray hair and a rugged appearance. Rand had never seen him before. "Please don't do anything with your hands," he said, "or I'll be forced to kill you."

"The way you killed Chessman?"

The cold eyes sharpened a bit. "What do you know about that?"

"You needed his records—a notebook or whatever—to gain access to the computer. You wouldn't be here so soon if you didn't have them."

He patted his breast pocket. "Oh, I have them. All the proper codes to reveal Chessman's secrets." He raised the gun a trifle. "Now just who are you?"

"The man sent to stop you," Rand said.

"Sent by Richard Chessman?"

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"No. By British Intelligence."

"Those fools!"

Rand moved a step closer, back to the computer console where he'd started. "They're fools, but I'm not. I'll bet your little notebook doesn't contain the access code word necessary to make the rest of it work, does it? Because Amos Chessman would have no need to write it down."

"Why not?"

"I think the code word was his middle name. It enabled him to gain access to a wealth of secret espionage records stored here while keeping them perfectly safe from inspection by any of ABC Toys' regular employees."

"His middle name . . ." The man with the gun thought about that. "And what is it?"

Rand looked at the silenced pistol. He knew he'd be a dead man as soon as he told. "We have to try it first, to see if I'm right. But ABC Toys suggests that Amos Chessman's middle name started with a B. Suppose his father had a sense of humor and gave him the name of an actual chessman. Not pawn or rook or—"

"Bishop!"

Rand nodded. "Amos Bishop Chessman. Let's try it." He took a step toward the keyboard.

"Hold it! Keep back and I'll try it." The gun never wavered. He sat down at the typewriter keyboard and flipped the *On* switch. Then he tapped out the letters with his left hand while holding the pistol in his right. "B-i-s-h-o-p! Let's see what—"

The machine paused for just an instant, then sprang to life with renewed chatter. The man shifted his eyes to look at the message being typed and Rand hurled the doll that had been standing on the edge of the desk.

"Damn!" The doll hit the man's hand as he fired, wide of the mark, and Rand was on him before he could aim again. They tumbled onto the floor, toppling the metal chair with a crash. Rand landed on top, but only for an instant. The other man was no younger, but he was stronger.

Rand felt his grip weakening. He felt himself rolling off the top. The gun was swinging around when suddenly the door to the computer room burst open.

"Hold it!" a voice shouted, and he recognized it as Hastings'.

There was a shot, two shots, and the man toppled forward onto him.

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"My God!" Hastings said.

"A bit of a surprise for you, I daresay."

"Do you know who this is, Rand?"

"I've got a pretty good idea it's the supposedly blown-up Mr. Ravic. Am I right?"

Later, up in Richard Chessman's office, they talked about it while they waited for Amos' son to arrive. "You had the right access code, Rand. The computer is disgorging its secrets—payments from Arab countries, information delivered, everything! How'd you know the word?"

"A lucky guess," Rand answered truthfully. "After all those years trying to break codes and ciphers at Double-C, I guess I was entitled to a lucky guess. But what about Ravic?"

"This time he's dead for good. The pistol is no doubt the same one he used on Chessman."

"You had a man on me, didn't you, Hastings?"

"Well, Rand, you know—"

"I know."

"When he phoned to say you'd gone into this building I decided to come down. I was prowling around when I heard the chair fall over."

"I suppose I should thank you."

"You can thank me by telling me about Ravic. If he didn't die in that explosion, who did?"

"I assume it was your man Cray, who vanished so completely. You said the body was blown apart, so positive identification would have been difficult. Atlanta went there with her daughter on some pretext, to make sure Ravic was hiding there. We know the daughter left her doll—and I thought at one point the doll might have held a bomb. But then it would have been blown apart, not become badly scorched as you described it.

"I think Ravic saw the doll after they'd left and picked it up. When he recognized it as an ABC doll he must have suspected or feared that his hiding place was discovered. He realized his life wasn't safe for long so he decided to end it on his own terms. After all, he owed nothing to you. So he slugged your man Cray, changed clothes with him, and set off a bomb he'd had with him all the time. Cray was dead in his place and he was free to go after ABC Toys. Earlier today he got up to Chessman's office and killed him to get the access code to the computerized records. He'd

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decided they'd be more profitable in his hands than delivered to you."

"We have them now anyway, and when Richard and his sister arrive I'll tell them they're out of the espionage business for good."

"If they're smart they're on a plane to Paris or Rome by now."

Hastings smiled. "Think you might meet them again one day?"

Rand shook his head. "Not me—you! I'm retired, remember? And Leila is waiting for me at home."

As it happened, Rand did meet them again one day.

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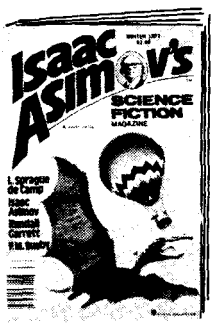

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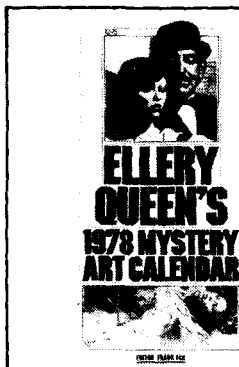

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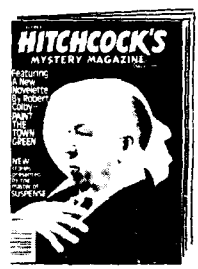

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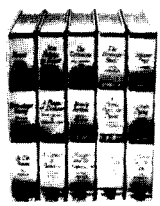

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